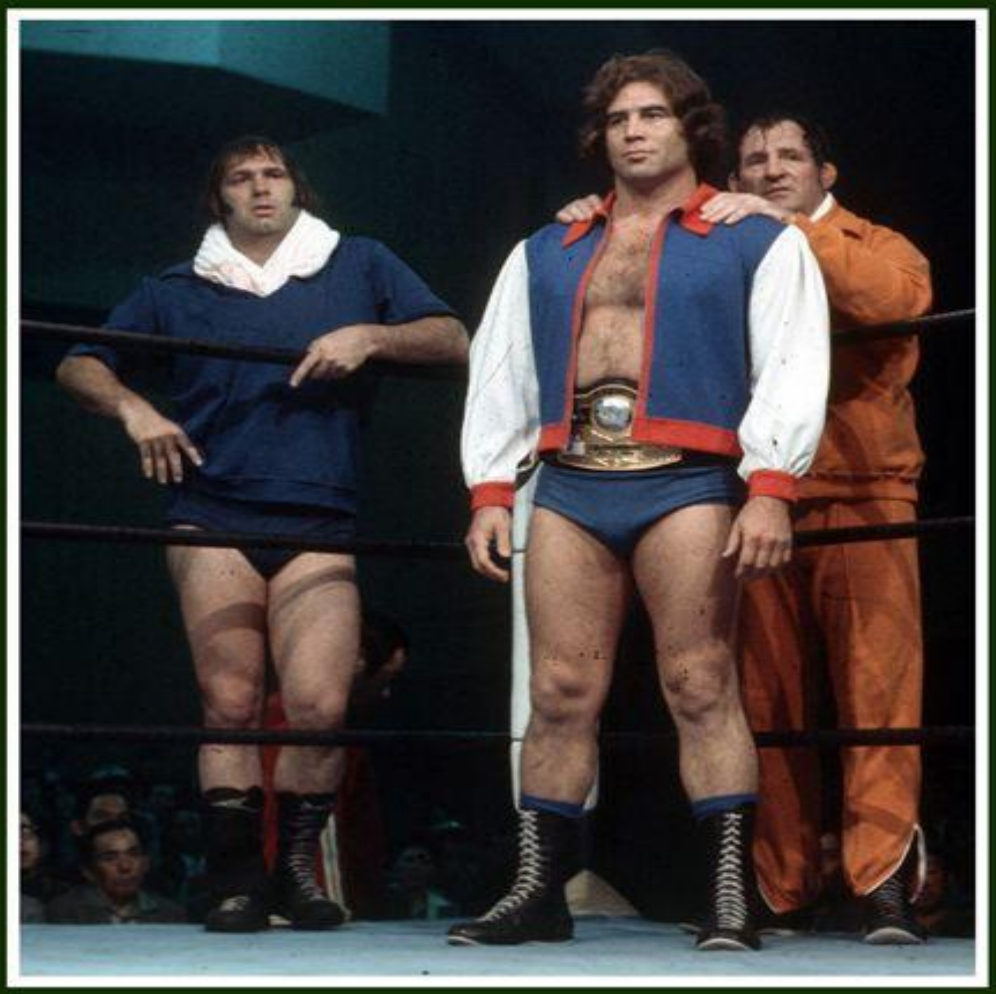
DDBRISCO

The Life and Times of National Collegiate and World Heavyweight Wrestling Champion

JACK BRISCO



by Jack Brisco

As told to William Murdock

BRISCO

by Jack Brisco, as told to William Murdock

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Foreword by Mike Mooneyham

When my good friend Bill Murdock announced his plans to write a book on Jack Brisco nearly ten years ago, I was ecstatic. I knew no one but Bill could bring the kind of passion and heartfelt sentiment that such a lofty undertaking deserved. So, when Bill told me earlier this year that an updated edition would be released, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of Jack's NWA [National Wrestling Alliance] world title win in Houston, I was equally overjoyed. It was a momentous event worthy of grand treatment.

The rich history of professional wrestling oozes throughout the pages of this wrestler's tale. The simplicity of the book's title expresses just what Jack Brisco was. Few words are more synonymous than "Brisco" and "wrestling," and if ever one individual was born to wrestle, it was

Jack.

But there's also another word that comes to mind whenever I think of Jack Brisco, and that word is hero.

Jack was an honest-to-goodness hero who pulled himself up by his bootstraps as a rawboned youngster in Oklahoma. He worked incredibly hard to beat the odds and went on to live his dream as a world-class athlete in both amateur and professional wrestling. Pure and simple, Jack was a true all-American; that rare breed of Spartan athlete who accomplishes amazing feats beyond the reach of mere mortals. From three-time state high-school champion to NCAA champion at Oklahoma State, to two-time world heavyweight champion in the pro ranks, Jack achieved the pinnacle of success at every level of wrestling.

Jack was such an extraordinary athlete that the all-state fullback passed up a chance to play for the legendary Bud Wilkinson's Oklahoma Sooners in

order to wrestle for national-powerhouse Oklahoma State, where he was NCAA runner-up in 1964 at 191 pounds. He won the championship the following year and finished the season without a single loss.

Devoid of ego and humble to a fault, Jack was a man's man who rose above childhood poverty and his hardscrabble station in life to succeed in a sport where one's worth is measured by his mental and physical toughness.

Jack Brisco was born for the professional wrestling business. With natural, God-given skills, handsome features, and that all-American background, he was tailor-made for the sport. Eddie Graham's creative genius as a booker, paired with legendary announcer Gordon Solie's astute commentary and ability to sell angles and characters, helped put Jack, with his rugged good looks, innate ability and charisma, on a fast track for the world heavyweight championship. Before he could get to the title,

however, he had to get through then-champion Dory Funk Jr. The battles those two waged over a period of several years were some of the most classic, talked-about series of matches in the history of pro wrestling.

Jack was a far cry from today's overly-privileged and overly-pampered star athletes. He never craved the spotlight, was happy for the success of others, and always seemed to be, for whatever reason, just happy to be part of the group. With a quiet self-confidence, he was happy in his own skin, and it showed. He was grateful to be part of a business that afforded him the opportunity to see the world, to perform at the highest level, and to be a member of a special fraternity. The business gave him a good life, along with the love of his life, his wife Jan.

Always willing to make a sacrifice, he never forgot the path that led him there — working in a coal mine, serving as a carpenter's helper, or putting in after-practice hours as a janitor —

while, at the same time, Sports Illustrated was hailing him as one of the greatest collegiate wrestlers in the country. Or, as a young star in the pro ranks, working the small towns in Arkansas for 25 bucks a shot, and giving it 100 percent, even though many of the fans stayed home due to a snowstorm. Full throttle was the only gear Jack Brisco ever knew.

In later years, when he could have just as easily picked up a quick paycheck as a consultant in the wrestling business, he was content to stay home and help run the "world-famous" Brisco Brothers Body Shop.

Jack also was a traditionalist who believed wrestlers should be athletes first and entertainers second, and yet, he didn't begrudge today's stars the big-money contracts and less-taxing schedules that didn't exist in Jack's era.

With due respect to Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, if there ever was a "People's Champion," Jack

Brisco was it. He was much more than a former NCAA and NWA world champion. He was a champion to a worldwide audience that adored and respected him. He was a man of character.

After covering the sport for nearly half a century, I consider myself privileged to have witnessed Jack's artistry in the ring, to have experienced the sheer splendor of a Funk-Brisco masterpiece, and to have been on hand decades later when Jack, along with brother Gerry, were honored by their peers and inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame.

But more than anything, I was honored to have known Jack Brisco the man.

The famed English philosopher G.K. Chesterton once said, "There is a great man who makes every man feel small, but the real great man is the man who makes every man feel great."

To me, and countless others, Jack Brisco was that real great man.

Introduction by Mike Chapman

Throughout the long and illustrious history of heavyweight wrestling, only a handful of champions have succeeded in both the amateur and professional forms of the sport. The first was Earl Caddock, who won three AAU [Amateur Athletic Union] titles before becoming the professional world heavyweight champion in 1917 by defeating Joe Stecher.

The next great amateur star to become world heavyweight champion was Ed Don George. A former AAU national champion and a 1928 Olympian, George became NWA world champion in 1931. Twenty-six years later, in 1957, Dick Hutton followed suit by taking the NWA championship from the legendary Lou Thesz. A three-time NCAA champion at Oklahoma A&M College, Hutton also was a member of the 1948

Olympic team.

Verne Gagne in the 1950s, and Dan Hodge in the 1960s, both made the successful transition from amateur champion to professional star in great style.

Jack Brisco continued that tradition in 1973 when he climbed into the ring as the top contender for the NWA world title held by Harley Race, and left as the new champion. Brisco's long and arduous journey to the top of the professional wrestling world began as a raw-boned youngster in Blackwell, Oklahoma, where he read the wrestling magazines of the day and dreamed about meeting the legendary champions in the ring. His heroes, men like Thesz, Hutton, Gagne, and Hodge, later served as his inspiration.

In 2001, Brisco joined all the above, as well as Earl Caddock, when he was inducted into the George Tragos/Lou Thesz Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame located in Newton, Iowa at the

International Wrestling Institute and Museum facility.

Brisco was a sensational high-school athlete, winning three state championships in the state of Oklahoma, and earning top honors as a bruising football star. At Oklahoma State University [nee Oklahoma A&M], he followed in the footsteps of Hutton by winning all-American honors on the mat. In 1965, his final season, he finished undefeated and won the NCAA title at 191 pounds.

He turned professional immediately and embarked upon a long, and often frustrating, march through the ranks of the professional side of the sport. One of the first orders of business he had to learn as a professional was to forget about his amateur glory days and learn the craft of exciting a crowd ... and pleasing the promoters, as well. It wasn't all a bed of roses for this tough kid from Oklahoma.

Author Bill Murdock has been a friend and

confidant of Jack Brisco for many years and has earned his total trust and respect. Bill, who serves on the board of directors of the International Wrestling Institute and Museum, has studied all aspects of both amateur and professional wrestling for decades. Among his friends and associates are some of the biggest names in professional history.

Bill Murdock has drawn from his extensive wrestling background and natural journalism skills to fashion a truly fascinating story of life in professional wrestling as it existed in the '70s and '80s. His biography of Jack Brisco will undoubtedly go down as one of the finest and most honest portraits of a greatly misunderstood sporting activity.

BRISCO is a book that will entertain, as well as educate. I highly recommend it to any fan of amateur or professional wrestling, as well as any person who is interested in the history of sports as a whole.

Introduction by Bill Murdock

It has been ten years since I first wrote BRISCO with Jack. The decade seems to have taken wings, and even though time has escaped us, the memories of my conversations with Jack are as vivid and exciting in my memory as they were when we first had them.

It has been 40 years since Jack climbed into the ring that Friday night in Houston as the number one challenger to Harley Race's NWA world heavyweight championship and left as champion ... 40 years since he became the first native American to win the greatest prize in the sport ... 40 years since a new era in wrestling began and the sport was changed forever.

As this tenth-anniversary edition goes to press, it has been only three years since we lost Jack. It

seems like longer than that now. At times, it seems like only yesterday.

As you will read, Jack was one of the heroes of my youth. Jack, along with George Scott, "Mr. Wrestling" Tim Woods, Dory Funk Jr., and Gerry Brisco, drew me into wrestling, and what I learned on the mat taught me the most about how to handle, endure, and succeed in all avenues of life, as well as affording me countless hours of enjoyment.

BRISCO was my first published book and I always will be grateful to my friend Mike Chapman, who not only gave me the opportunity to meet Jack, but to publish my article on Jack and his days at Oklahoma State and to expand the article into this book. Mike founded W.I.N. Magazine, as well as the International Wrestling Institute.

Through the Institute, Mike brought together the history of amateur and professional wrestling, and created a place for competitors, coaches, and fans of all levels to view artifacts, memorabilia,

photos, and films, and to walk through numerous halls of fames from the Alan and Gloria Rice Greco-Roman Hall of Fame to the George Tragos/Lou Thesz Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame. In my opinion, Mike Chapman is the greatest historian and author the sport of wrestling has or ever has had. Only he could have put together what he has for the sport of wrestling. I am honored to call him my friend.

Mike has since retired from the Institute and has moved on to other endeavors. The Institute has merged with the National Wrestling Hall of Fame at Oklahoma State in Stillwater and has moved its physical location to Waterloo, Iowa — Dan Gable's hometown. It has been rechristened the National Wrestling Hall of Fame Dan Gable Museum in both size and stature, thanks to the vision of Executive Director Leroy Smith, the incomparable Dan Gable, and the hard work and dedication of the Gable Museum's director Kyle Klingman.

As the old saying goes, "Those who drink the water should not forget who dug the well." Mike Chapman dug the well.

This edition came to be when I received a phone call from my friend, author and historian, Scott Teal, founder of Crowbar Press. Along with the "Russian Nightmare," Nikita Koloff, the three of us worked closely together on my previous book, NIKITA, A Tale of the Ring and Redemption.

With this being the fortieth anniversary of Jack winning the NWA world heavyweight title, Scott asked if I would be interested in publishing a second edition of BRISCO. The idea had been in the back of my mind since Jack's memorial service in February 2010. Up to that time, I hadn't thought about it, but with Jack's passing, I knew there was more of Jack's story to be told — not just about his death, but a number of things he had told me after the first book was on the shelves. Jim Ross gave me more incentive when he also asked if I had considered writing an updated edition.

I quickly took Scott up on his kind offer and you are holding the result in your hands. I am grateful to Scott for giving my first endeavor and, what's more, the great story of this phenomenal athlete, wrestler, and truly good man, the opportunity to be read by a new generation of fans, and to offer those who have read this before more of the history and remarkable legend of Jack Brisco.

In addition to everything from the original manuscript, this edition contains more historical background, stories, and memories, all of which surfaced after the first edition was printed. Many times, Jack would tell me something when we would talk on the telephone, or when we were together at an event or book signing. When I would ask, "Why didn't you tell me that when we were working on the book?," Jack would almost always reply with a smile. "I didn't think of it until just now."

This edition also has two additions. First, a new Foreword by my friend, journalist, author, and one

of the best (if not the best) professional wrestling historian and Hall of Fame member, Mike Mooneyham, of the Charleston Post-Courier, and finally, an Afterword by my friend, 16-time world heavyweight champion, WWE superstar, and Hall of Famer, Adam Copeland, who most of us probably know better as "Edge."

Their thoughts and insight only add to the tale Jack and I sought to tell ten years ago. Adam and Mike's words have only served to make this anniversary edition that much more relevant.

To those of you who are reading this for the first time, and to those of you who may be reading it again, I hope it brings you even a small part of the joy it has me these past ten years.

It has been a little more than three years since we lost Jack to a massive heart attack on Monday, February 1, 2010. Within hours of his death, news sources around the globe reported that Jack had passed away. I learned of Jack's death when his

brother, and my close friend, Gerry, called and simply said, "Bill, we lost Jack this morning."

I lost a friend and hero that day, but my loss pales in comparison to what his wife Jan and his brothers Gerry, Bill, Gene, sisters Shirley and Sharon, and his children lost. The world lost a great champion, and even more so, a good man. Goodness and greatness seldom reside in the same person. It did in Jack Brisco.

Jack is remembered for many things, including husband, father, and brother, but to the tens of thousands who only knew him from the ring, I'm sure they share the same sentiment as the late Jay Roberts, former football and wrestling star at the University of Iowa and founding board member of the Dan Gable International Wrestling Institute. Upon hearing of Jack's death, Jay called and asked me to pass on his condolences to Jan, Gerry, and the rest of Jack's family, saying, "Jack Brisco was as good as I have ever seen."

Indeed ...

With every good wish.

Original introduction (2003) by Bill Murdock

I never really paid much attention to professional wrestling until I was in the sixth grade. I had just moved to Asheville, North Carolina from Bowling Green, Kentucky, and, as with any new guy in a new place, I had to find new friends. And that's where I first learned about wrestling.

My first day in class at Valley Springs Elementary School, I met Greg Gore. Greg welcomed me into his circle of friends and into the world of wrestling. Every Saturday afternoon at one o'clock, I would find myself in Greg's living room, along with John Creegan, Lee Harrell, David Norton, Kenny Rainwater, Randy Elingburg, and a number of other friends, eating frozen Chef Boyardee pizza and Fritos, drinking an endless river of Pepsi, and marveling at the exploits of our heroes on Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling

on WFBC channel four.

The original wrestling program in the Carolinas came on the air January 11, 1958. Taped at Channel 3, WBTV, Charlotte, Bill Ward became the announcer. In 1959, WRAL-TV, Channel 5, in Raleigh, went on the air and Bob Caudle became its announcer. The third TV wrestling show was on WGHP, Channel 8, High Point, which first aired February 1964 with longtime station sports announcer Charlie Harville at the mike. The latter's Championship Wrestling aired Saturday night after being taped at the WGHP studios on the second floor of the Sheraton Hotel on North Main Street in High Point.

As soon as Bob Caudle, the commentator for the program, bade us good-bye and said, "See you next week," we were in Greg's backyard imitating what we had just seen on the television. A few minor scrapes aside, we had the time of our lives. During those late afternoons, we shed our own identities and, for a little while, became

George Scott, Mr. Wrestling, Johnny Weaver, and Abe Jacobs, practicing our sleeper holds, standing head cradles, and kiwi leg rolls. We were all heroes back then, each of us a world champion, even though our world didn't extend beyond Greg's back yard.

Then again, it didn't need to.

But wrestling taught us more than the spinning toehold and the Lou Thesz Press. We honed our negotiating and networking skills early, thanks to wrestling. We spent hours on the phone piecing together our plans on how to get permission from our parents and a ride to the Asheville City Auditorium every Wednesday night.

"Yes, our homework is done."

"Randy's mom will take us if you can pick us up."

"I know it's a school night, but it's for the Atlantic Coast tag-team title ..."

We learned early on, if we could sell our parents on this, we could pretty much sell anyone on anything, and more times than not, we were in our seats for the 8:15 p.m. bell time. In retrospect, all these years later, it did seem like we sold our parents on letting us go to the matches, but it only seemed that way. Looking back, I don't think we convinced them at all. I'm sure they just grew tired of our collective pleading.

What amazed me at first was what I saw as the ring lights glared onto the white, dingy canvas. I call it a ring light, but it was far from what we see today. The light that hung over the ring in the old Asheville Municipal Auditorium was an old, galvanized wash bucket; the kind in which you see folks taking a bath in old photographs. The bucket had a hole drilled in the bottom, with a single strand of electric wire passing through to the light fixture. Three strands of thin metal cable surrounded by plastic tubing formed the "ropes." We thought they were real ropes, but we wouldn't have cared if we had known the

specifics. We were there to watch "professional wrestling," and it didn't get any better than that.

The ring at the auditorium looked a lot smaller at the live show than the rings did on television. The ring at the TV studio filled the screen as much as it filled our minds. The ring may have seemed smaller, but the two athletes who competed inside it seemed larger than they did on TV. They seemed larger than life. Well, they were larger than our lives, anyway.

By the time we were in the midst of high school, the old City Auditorium was replaced by the new Asheville Civic Center [in 1974] and wrestling was moved from once a week on Wednesday to once a month on Sunday. If there was a better way to spend a Sunday afternoon in the mountains of western North Carolina, we sure didn't know what it was. Bell time was three o'clock in the afternoon, which left plenty of time to eat lunch after church services and, if all went well, the main event would be over in time to get back for

evening services. It was a full day of religion and wrestling. Life was good.

Greg and I were there to see all the stars through whom we lived vicariously. The Mid-Atlantic territory boasted the greatest lineup of talent anywhere in the country at the time, and very possibly the world: George Scott, Tim "Mr. Wrestling" Woods, Abe Jacobs, Wahoo McDaniel, Gene and Ole Anderson, Paul Jones, a very young Ricky Steamboat, and "Nature Boy" Ric Flair. Like many others, we thought we knew them well enough to call them by their first name. Greg and I suffered with them. We felt every blow and grieved at the loss of their titles. Despite having never been in the ring, we believed we belonged in there with them.

On July 20, 1975, we were sitting in section C, row eight, in the balcony. On that afternoon, there was an important reason for us to be there. Someone special was going to be in the main event. We would have been there just to see

our local heroes, but the addition of the newcomer only added to the excitement of the event.

His opponent already was in the ring. Chief Wahoo McDaniel was in full Indian regalia and was anticipating his chance at the crown jewel of the sport of professional wrestling. His opponent wasn't an alumnus from Wahoo's beloved University of Oklahoma alma mater, but from the arch-rival Oklahoma State University. Asheville seemed to be an unusual place for these two great athletes from Oklahoma to decide which of the two was "the greatest wrestler in the world." There was no music and no explosions, which fans would become accustomed to years later in the WWE. There was just a spotlight from the far corner of the opposite side of the balcony that reached out along the empty aisle leading to the ring.

After waiting with anticipation for several minutes after Wahoo entered the ring, his opponent finally made his appearance, walking purposefully

to the ring. Cheers rose throughout the crowd; slowly at first as the folks at ringside caught a glimpse of him, and then the noise slowly rose to a crescendo as he approached the ring.

Even though it seemed like I was a mile away, it would have been hard to miss the focus and the concentration in his eyes. He climbed the stairs to the ring, ducked through the ropes, and stared at the man in the opposite corner. That was it. That was why we were all there. The main event featured the world heavyweight champion — Jack Brisco. That scene repeated itself countless times during Jack's career. There were countless fans all over the world who, in their own towns, witnessed what we did on that Sunday. They eagerly waited for this former NCAA champion to display his skills and again prove to all why he wore the crown.

Night after night, in town after town, in country after country he brought wrestling fans to their feet. Most of them had been to the arenas before,

but Jack made them sit up and take notice. A former national amateur champion, he now was the heavyweight champion of the world; a champion from the lineage of Gotch, Hutton, and Thesz.

Other world champions had visited Asheville; four, in fact, if you count the great Frank Gotch. Frank Gotch had wrestled here in 1906, two years before he defeated the "Russian Lion," George Hackenschmidt, for the world title at the Dexter Park Pavilion in Chicago.

Gotch was the American heavyweight champion at the time and he was barnstorming the country. He had defeated nine opponents in the three months preceding a March 23, 1906 battle he had with Charles Olson before a record-breaking crowd in the Grand Opera House. Newspapers of the day reported it as the best match that had ever been seen, with Olson being the first man in a year, and only the second in three years, to take a fall from Gotch. Frank won the match with his famous toehold. Gotch went on to worldwide fame,

fortune, and icon status. Olson was one of the foremost wrestlers/showmen of his era, and then went on to a storied career in the motion picture exhibition business in Indianapolis. He was one of the city's leading lights until his death in the 1940s.

Lou Thesz wrestled and beat Sandy Scott at the old Civic Auditorium on September 4, 1968. Thesz, like Gotch, was no longer the champion at the time.

The second youngest man to ever hold the title, Dory Funk Jr., made frequent title defenses in Asheville during the early '70s in the old city auditorium on the weekly Wednesday night cards. The man who beat him for the title, Handsome Harley Race, made one appearance on July 4, 1973, defeating Johnny Weaver just sixteen days before that fateful night against Brisco in Houston.

They all were great champions in their own right, but Jack was different. He was an NCAA

champion now at the top of the professional wrestling world, the man an article in Wrestling Revue magazine once referred to as "The New Gotch."

Twenty years later, I received a phone call from the executive director and founder of the International Wrestling Institute and Museum, Mike Chapman. He asked me if I wanted to write an article about Brisco for W.I.N. Magazine while I was in Tampa for a Cauliflower Alley Club award banquet. I jumped at the chance to meet one of my idols and to talk about his career. That was one opportunity I wasn't about to let pass by.

After trading a few phone calls back and forth, I found myself sitting in Jack's office at the Brisco Brothers Body Shop. Being new to Tampa, and probably to steady my nerves, I was accompanied by my good friend Jean Scott (wife of the legendary wrestler and booker George Scott).

Surprisingly enough, there was no hint in Jack's

office that he had ever wrestled, let alone that he had ruled the mat as both an amateur and a professional. Instead, it was decorated with Native American art and miniature NASCAR collectables. It was a modest office large enough to accommodate only a desk and a small couch. The size of his office didn't fit his stature, but it did represent his humble nature.

We talked about his early career and how he got involved in wrestling. We talked about our love for things other than wrestling, like Duke University basketball. We hit it off instantly. It was then I realized what a wonderful experience it was to discover how much I admired someone for who they really were, rather than what I had perceived them to be.

Jack Brisco was one of those people.

From childhood poverty and the mats of Oklahoma, to the rings of the major arenas throughout the world, Jack Brisco has personified

the term "champion." Charles Dickens' opening line in David Copperfield reads, "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."

Jack's story is certainly one of a hero; not only in his own life, but in mine and so many others. He has told it to me in his own words. I sincerely hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

Chapter 1
Freddie Joe

I love wrestling. I have since I saw my first match when I was in the eighth grade. It has given me not only a great living, but a great life. It has taken me around the world more times than I can remember, and it has given me the opportunity to meet many wonderful people in all walks of life. Wrestling has provided well for my family and for me. It has taught me to set goals, persevere when I fell short of those goals, and how to get off the mat when life and its circumstances put me on my back. Wrestling also saved my life.

I wasn't always known as Jack. My given name is Fred Joe, or "Freddie Joe," as my family and friends called me until I was about five or six. I now live in Odessa, Florida, just outside of Tampa, but I still have the dust of Oklahoma running through my veins, and proudly so. It is not

certain that my story is really all that different from anyone else's, but I suppose winning the national collegiate wrestling championship [NCAA], and then the world heavyweight championship on two occasions, has brought me into some prominence, if for nothing more than my wrestling skills. Champions on any level seem to be perceived differently than others.

The truth is, champions are not all that different from those who have yet to win a title. Without a doubt, there is something that compels those seeking a championship to push on; something that drives them no matter what the odds are, and no matter the route that brought them there. I believe that is a quality we all possess. What we do with it — how we harness the drive, fear, or whatever it is that compels us — is what is important. It is also a matter of what we are willing to sacrifice to reach the goals we have set.

Championships and success in any endeavor do not come to those who wait. You have to go get

them. It is not a matter of following your dreams, but a matter of hunting them down and forcing them into submission.

I was the third of six children born to a marvelous mother and an all-but-nonexistent father, both of Native American descent. Both my parents were from the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes of Oklahoma, a proud heritage I share with my brothers, sisters, father, and mother. But that was all I ever shared with my father. If my will and drive came from anywhere, it was from my mom, Iona. She raised all six of the Brisco clan almost entirely by herself. That must have come from the Chickasaw blood. In the Chickasaw culture, the woman is head of the household and takes care of the children, elders, and all that encompasses the family.

My father, Floyd, was a mechanic, with as much propensity for the bottle as for automobile engines. As time went on, the bottle would win with much more frequency and would eventually

get the better of him. He would wander off for a day or two and then end up back home. The next time he would be gone a little longer, and then a little longer still, until his stays away from home would extend to a week or two before returning.

One day when I was nine years old, Floyd just walked away and never came back. I didn't see him again until I was sixteen, and then only for a few moments. By then, it really didn't matter, though. He was no more than a faint memory. We had our family and he wasn't a part of it.

When I was born, my family was living in Seminole, Oklahoma. Seminole was not much bigger than the spot that would have represented it on a map. On September 21, 1941, I'm sure there were more than a few maps circulating around the United States that may not have had Seminole on them it at all. Fortunately, the town was only about 20 miles from Oklahoma City, which had the one thing my mother needed that day — a hospital.

As I previously mentioned, I wasn't given the name Jack at birth. That came from my grandfather, A.W. Brisco. Everyone in the community knew Grandpa as "Woody," which came from his middle name, Woodruff. He owned a small country gas station a block away from our house. He would pump gas, fix flat tires, and do minor repairs.

I loved Grandpa as much as I could have loved anyone. Since my brothers, Gene and Bill, were six years and three years older than me, respectively, I spent a great deal of my time hanging around with grandpa. He was glad to have me around. Some of the happiest days of my life were spent around that little gas station. When I wasn't asking him a thousand questions, or sneaking a soda pop from the cooler that sat outside the front door, I would be chasing rabbits around the fields that surrounded the station.

That's where the name Jack came from. They weren't ordinary rabbits I was chasing. They were

big jackrabbits. Grandpa never liked the name Freddie Joe very much, so he started calling me Jack. As far as I was concerned, if Grandpa wanted to call me Jack, then Jack it was. It was just one of the many things for which I have to thank my grandfather. After all, I can't quite imagine someone named "Freddie Joe" as the world heavyweight wrestling champion of the world.

When I would register for school, I was required to register as Freddie Joe Brisco, but I would insist on being called Jack. If the teacher, when calling roll, would call Freddie Joe instead of Jack, I would refuse to answer. It wasn't long until everyone, teachers and all, referred to me as Jack.

After my father deserted us, my oldest brother, Gene, left for college, and my brother Bill quit high school and joined the Marines. There wasn't much left for the remaining five of us in Seminole, so mom packed what few belongings we had and we moved to Blackwell, where my mother's sister

lived. Mom got a job at the Ball Brothers Glass Company making fruit jars. Not long after taking the job, a tornado blew through Blackwell and completely destroyed the factory.

It happened on the evening of May 25, 1955 while my mother and a full shift of her co-workers were in the plant. What was miraculous was that not one person in the plant lost his or her life. Just before the tornado hit, everyone hid under the heavy machinery that was used to make the glass jars. Thankfully, my mom and her friends all survived. Unfortunately, their jobs didn't.

It bears mention that other members of the community didn't fare as well. Nineteen people were killed in Blackwell and another 280 were injured. Approximately 80 blocks in town were damaged or destroyed. The damage was massive with 500 homes damaged, 400 homes destroyed, 20 business establishments leveled, and 40 additional businesses were damaged. The tornado passed east of Braman, then turned to the north-

northwest and dissipated to the southeast of South Haven, in south central Kansas. Damage to crops in the area was estimated at $15,000 and damage to other property was estimated at $8,000,000.

Mom wasn't out of a job for long. She found work at Bob's Grill as a waitress. It was a good place to work, even though it didn't pay very well. In fact, it is still in operation and run by Bob's son. It remains one of the true landmarks of Blackwell. The worst thing about the tornado was it caused our family to separate for awhile. Mom couldn't afford to feed four children on what she was making as a waitress, so my sisters, Shirley and Sharon, moved in with my aunt, who lived down the road.

That left my little brother, Gerry — who is a little more than four years my junior — and me at home with Mom. When we moved to Blackwell, I was in the eighth grade, Gerry was in fourth, and Sharon had yet to start school. Gerry and I became inseparable. With Mom working all the time, I

was as much a father to Gerry as I was an older brother.

I learned how to cook and how to iron so I could take care of the three of us and help Mom out with the household chores. I didn't want her to come home and have to cook and clean for us after spending so many hours on her feet. To his credit, Gerry didn't say too much about my culinary skills ... or lack of them. I could make some pretty good scrambled eggs and bacon and could cook a bowl of beans with the best of them. We were thankful to have something to eat and a mother who loved us and worked as hard as she did. Gerry followed me everywhere and was a good kid, but he knew if he wasn't, he would have to answer to me..

Actually, Gerry found the mat before I did. He began wrestling in the fifth grade after failing to acquire a spot on the basketball team. Our wrestling coach, Bobby Lyons, approached Gerry and suggested he look into wrestling to help develop his coordination. Gerry took his advice

and switched to wrestling, which he took to naturally as he took to breathing. Gerry made the county and city league teams before he was old enough to try out for our middle-school team.

I tried to attend as many of his matches as possible. In one early tournament, he wanted to compete in the heavyweight division. I told him he was too light to compete in that division, but he wouldn't listen. I was wrestling as a heavyweight at Blackwell High, so Gerry wanted to be a heavyweight, too.

He made it to the finals of the tournament by pinning his first two opponents. They were big "roly-poly" kids. Gerry took them down, rolled them over, and pinned them in short order. In the finals, Gerry had to face the son of the school principal. The kid outweighed him by at least 30 pounds and had been wrestling for a couple of years. I pulled Gerry aside before the match and told him, "If you don't kick this guy's butt, don't bother coming home." Not only that, I only gave

him 20 seconds to do it.

When the opening whistle blew, Gerry hit a double-leg, took the kid to his back, and pinned him. The time of the match was sixteen seconds. As soon as the referee hit the mat and raised his hand, Gerry ran off the mat to the scorer's table to see how long it had taken him to make the pin. Winner or not, he wanted to see if it was safe to go home. It is amazing what a little brotherly encouragement can do.

More important than winning wrestling matches was making sure Gerry finished his lessons and did his homework, which he usually did without too much trouble. There was one night, however, when he decided he didn't want to do his homework. "I'm too tired. I want to go to sleep," he whined.

"I don't care how tired you are. You can sit there and cry all night if you want, but you are not going to bed until you finish your homework," I told

him. He finished his homework and went to bed. As much as I loved him, he knew I meant business.

One night, years later, Gerry told me his son pulled the same stunt he had tried with me, refusing to do his homework while pleading near exhaustion. "I'm going to tell you what your Uncle Jack used to tell me," he told him. "I don't care how tired you are ..." I guess Gerry had been listening to me after all.

There were times when he and I would team up and try to pull the wool over our mother's eyes. Mom would come home late, but before she would let him go to bed, she would want to quiz Gerry on his spelling words for the next day's test. He would walk around and stall when he wasn't prepared and didn't know how to spell a given word, giving me time to sneak outside. He would take a seat in the kitchen in front of the window and I would stand outside and whisper the correct spelling. It would get Gerry off the hook

and off to bed. The subterfuge didn't last long. Mom caught on quickly and moved Gerry and his spelling book to another room. It seemed we were destined to be a tag team long before we entered the ring.

And, of course, we wrestled. We wrestled in the living room, in the kitchen, in our bedroom, and in the front and back yard. We broke more than our fair share of furniture, much to mom's chagrin. I'm sure Gerry would agree that we both suffered more mat burns from our living room carpet than we ever did competing on the mat or in the ring.

Throughout his career, Gerry found himself being compared with me. He was forced to live in the shadow of his older brother. It never seemed to bother him, though, as he forged his own way on the mat and later in the ring. He was a three-time state runner-up in high school and did well at Oklahoma State, but fell just short of winning the national championship. He became a star in the ring in his own right and won more than his share

of titles, including the NWA [National Wrestling Alliance] world junior heavyweight championship.

When asked about being compared to me, Gerry would always say it was a great honor to be mentioned in the same breath as his older brother, and even more of an honor to have me as a brother and as a friend. As much as I appreciate what he says, I believe he has it backwards. The honor is mine.

Chapter 2
State Champion

I had never seen any wrestling until I was in eighth grade, when I played guard on the basketball team and fullback on the football team at Lovett Junior High. I wasn't looking for any other sports. Our football team went 7-0 that year and I was doing well as one of the top scorers in every game. On the basketball court, I helped Lovett to a 17-1 record, but it was wrestling that caught my attention and held me in a grip I wouldn't be able to break for the rest of my life.

The first wrestling match I saw was between two homerooms at Lovett. Each homeroom had its own wrestling team and they engaged in intramural wrestling meets. I was in the gym after basketball practice and saw two of the homerooms going at it on the mat.

That was all it took. By the end of the first match, I was hooked and wanted to try my own abilities on the mat, but I knew I would have to give up basketball to do it. It wasn't the easiest decision I had made to that point in my life, but it wasn't all that difficult, either. I wanted to wrestle.

The next year, I went out for my homeroom wrestling team. I thought I had a good chance of making it. Only one person stood in my way ... Kenneth Allwhite. Ken was a good guy and had been wrestling for quite a while. In fact, he was the Oklahoma State junior high-school heavyweight champion. We had a wrestle-off, and at the end of the match, the A-B homeroom had a new guy in the heavyweight slot ... me.

I have to tell you, Ken was tough, and our wrestle-offs were as intense as any matches I had. During our sophomore year, the local newspaper ran pictures of Ken and I and reported on the "ding-dong elimination battles" we were having for the heavyweight spot on the Blackwell

High School Maroons wrestling team. The thing about it was that Ken never beat me to regain the spot he had once held at Lovett Junior High. Ken wrestled in junior-varsity matches and stayed with wrestling through high school, even though he only wrestled a few preliminary matches. Ken never stepped foot on the mat in a varsity match in high school, but even so, he received a full scholarship to the University of Oklahoma to wrestle for the Sooners. That was unheard of, but Ken was that good.

After football season during my sophomore year, I made my decision to trade in my basketball uniform for a pair of wrestling shoes. After the last game, the team divided up into those who were going to play basketball and those who were going to wrestle, with each of the two groups meeting with the respective coaches. When it was my turn, I stood up and walked toward the side of the dressing room where Chuck Hetrick, the wrestling coach, was sitting. "Where are you going, Jack? We need you," the basketball coach called

after me.

"Sorry, coach," I said. "I think I want to try wrestling."

In addition to coaching wrestling at Blackwell, Coach Hetrick taught health and physical education. He won the state championship at Blackwell and was a national champion at Oklahoma State [then A&M] at 128 pounds, winning the title in 1949 at the NCAA wrestling championships. He not only took the national title that year at Colorado State, but was voted outstanding wrestler of the tournament. He went on to an outstanding coaching career at Blackwell, Stillwater and Bartlesville Sooner. For any wrestler to learn from someone with his skills and credentials was a dream come true, and I wasn't going to miss out on that opportunity.

On the night Coach Hetrick won the 128-pound title at the NCAA wrestling tournament, one of the great amateur matches of all time took place. In

the last match of the tournament, two great amateur champions, both of whom would become world heavyweight champions in the pro ranks, faced off in the finals of the unlimited [heavyweight] division. Verne Gagne defeated two-time defending NCAA heavyweight champion, and Coach Hetrick's Oklahoma A&M teammate, Dick Hutton, one to one on a referee's decision, derailing Dick's quest to be the first man to win four NCAA wrestling titles (he would come back the next year to win the title for a third time). The match was one of the best collegiate, albeit controversial, decisions of all time and is still being debated by many today. Of course, Dick would go on to defeat the great Lou Thesz on November 14, 1957 in Toronto to capture the National Wrestling Alliance world heavyweight title, and Verne would beat Edouard Carpentier for the first of what would become ten American Wrestling Association world title reigns.

As important as that match was, Coach Hetrick was named outstanding wrestler of the

tournament. He was a great competitor.

"Come with me, Jack, and I will make you a state champion," coach Hetrick told me. That was music to my ears. I was ready, but I had no idea how quickly his prophecy would be fulfilled.

When I first got on the mat, I absorbed everything Coach Hetrick showed me like a sponge. As much as I loved football, being on the mat felt as natural to me as walking. The one-on-one competition was everything I wanted, and needed, in a sport. It was knowing that, at the end of the six minutes, a win or a loss was up to me. No matter what anyone else on the team did, if I was to have my hand raised, it was totally dependent on my abilities and what I was able to accomplish on the mat. I was always a bit nervous before any match I had in those early years, but the excitement made up for that. As soon as I locked up with an opponent, the anxiety disappeared and it was all business.

I won my first match that year, but just barely. After a few more matches, Coach Hetrick entered the Maroons in a tournament in Tulsa. I won the first two matches, which put me in the finals for the first time in my life. My opponent was David Adams, a senior from the Tulsa Rogers High wrestling team. David was quite an athlete and went on to Arkansas on a full football scholarship. It was a close match, but he took me down in the third period and rode me out. He won the match five to three, giving me my first defeat in wrestling. I found out one thing quickly; I liked winning much better than losing. I didn't want to lose again ... and I wouldn't.

After the tournament, I wrestled in seven or eight dual meets and had my hand raised at the end of every match. Being a heavyweight was a mixed blessing. I didn't have to cut weight, so I could eat anything I wanted. It used to drive my less fortunate teammates crazy. "You're lucky, Jack. You don't know what it's like to have to starve yourself," they would tell me. They were

right. I didn't know, and I didn't want to find out, either. Little did I realize what was in store for me over the next few years.

The other side of the coin was that in many dual meets, I found myself placed into a position where, if I won my match, the Maroons would win the meet ... but if I didn't, the team would lose. It was a lot of pressure for a high-school kid, but I loved it.

I began my amateur career weighing 185 pounds during my sophomore year, 190 in my junior year, and completed my senior year weighing 195 pounds. Back then, the weight classes were different than they are today. Any wrestler weighing more than 165 pounds was delegated to wrestling in the heavyweight division, with no ceiling on the weight class. On a number of occasions, I found myself wrestling opponents weighing nearly 300 pounds, or even more.

Usually I didn't have too much difficulty pinning

them if I moved quickly and stayed out from under them. Most of the time, I would just take them down to their back. Once I had them in that position, they were like giant tortoises and couldn't get up.

The biggest match of the regular season during my sophomore year put me back on the mat with David Adams, the only guy who had beaten me that year. I had been doing well as a first-year wrestler and I received quite a bit of publicity in our local newspaper. When the dual meet with Tulsa was announced, the gym at Blackwell High School had its first turn-away crowd for a wrestling match — my first sell-out.

The gym was packed and, as my luck would have it, the meet was tied going into the heavyweight match. I was like a wild horse chomping at the bit to get at Adams. The standing-room-only crowd was cheering even before I got on the mat. I tore into him as if my life depended on it and wore him out. By the third period, the crowd was almost at a

fever pitch. I didn't let up for a second. It was like I was in another world.

There could have been 10,000 people there or just ten. It didn't matter, and I didn't know or care. In my mind, there were only two people on the entire planet, and they both were on the mat at Blackwell High School. When the final whistle blew and I looked up at the scoreboard, it read 4-0. I had evened the score.

The match ended, I shook David's hand, and the referee grabbed mine and raised it up into the air. It was more than tying the score. The Maroons beat Tulsa! The crowd ran down the steps of the bleachers to the mat, lifted me up on their shoulders, and carried me off the mat. It was just like in the movies. It was no wonder I loved wrestling.

I finished my sophomore year with seventeen wins and one defeat. Coach Hetrick left to coach at Stillwater High School and was replaced by

Bobby Lyons, a former two-time runner-up for the 130-pound NCAA wrestling title (he lost in the finals in 1955 and 1956 to my future coach at Oklahoma State and mentor Myron Roderick).

We were sorry to see Coach Hetrick go, but it was a good opportunity for him. Coach Lyons wasted no time in picking up where Coach Hetrick left off. Coach Lyons left a legacy of his own. One of the top high-school wrestling tournaments in Oklahoma, along with its coveted trophy, proudly carried his name for more than 40 years.

The state championships were held in Edmund, Oklahoma. I won my first match, taking a decision over a wrestler named Ellis from Harding High, 5 to 1. In the quarter-finals, I took the decision from Von Henry of Northwest Classen High School, 9 to 6, and in the semi-finals, pinned Kannady from Ponca City in one minute, 38 seconds. With that win, I was in the finals against Gaylen Webb from Perry High School.

Strangely enough, the match for the state championship was the easiest one of the tournament for me. I won 5 to 2. I had wrestled Gaylen before, during the regular season, and defeated him, 9 to 3. I was the only Maroon to win a state title, but not the only one to reach the finals. David Wilcox, who wrestled at 114 pounds, and Phil Keely, at 140 pounds, both lost in the championship round. As a team, we didn't fare all that well. Perry took the team title with 61 points and we finished fifth with 26 points. Finishing with a fifth-place standing for the team and the state heavyweight championship wasn't a bad start for a first-year wrestler. I couldn't wait for the next season.

It's difficult to remember who was more elated; my mom or me. She was as proud as she could be. She would be at every match, no matter what she had to do to rearrange her schedule. She would catch a ride with other parents going to the matches, or with neighbors who followed our high-school teams. For me, the only disheartening part

of winning the state championship was that my grandfather wasn't there to see it. He had passed away some time before. There is no doubt in my mind that if he had been there, he would have been prouder than anyone in the gym, or in the state of Oklahoma, for that matter. Of course, my brother Gerry was there, and my sisters Sharon and Shirley. My brother Gene also made it in for the tournament. Bill was still in the service, but he was there to see me take the title during my junior year.

As a junior, I continued to play football and made all-conference, all-state, and was picked as starting fullback for the North team in the annual North-South football classic. Football was almost as important to me as wrestling. I loved the competition and the physical contact on the field. I knew wrestling was the sport for me, but when I was on the field in the heat of a close game, a football career also looked inviting. In the back of my mind, I knew the time would come when I would have to choose between the two; but not for

awhile. Besides, I was having too much fun to spend too much time thinking about it.

It also was about this time that I started to take an interest in professional wrestling. Of course, the biggest names in Oklahoma wrestling were Danny Hodge and Dick Hutton, both of whom were three-time NCAA champions who had moved on to find success on the pro circuit. As I mentioned earlier, Dick had beaten Lou Thesz for the NWA world heavyweight title and Danny Hodge was the reigning NWA world junior heavyweight champion. Professional wrestling was different from amateur wrestling, but if it had to do with wrestling, I wanted to be a part of it. Danny became my hero and I wanted to follow in his footsteps.

When people spoke of Danny Hodge in Oklahoma, they did it with an almost reverent tone, as if the name itself defined wrestling. It did, not only to me, but to tens of thousands of others. He personified wrestling to me then, and he still does

today.

Danny was born and reared in Perry, about 40 miles south of Blackwell. Danny wasn't just a hometown hero who made all of us "Dust Bowl" citizens proud to be an "Okie." The whole world knew who Danny was, and he was one of us.

Danny was born into abject poverty, the second of four children, on Friday, May 13, 1932, during the worst economic time our country had ever experienced. Oklahoma was not only devastated by the Depression, but by Mother Nature, as horrific dust storms all but destroyed our state. Danny's dad, a hired hand in the oilfields when he could find work, turned to the bottle more often than not and seldom was home. Dan's mom, much like mine, had to fend for her family and make sure they had food on the table, which in those days was as difficult as the times themselves.

As with so many prominent men, it is in adversity that greatness is born. Danny had to fight almost

from the moment he was born, and in the eighth grade, he focused that fight on the wrestling mat. But wrestling was tough in Perry, as it was everywhere in the state, and it took awhile for Danny to earn his way into the starting line-up. As a junior in high school, he took second in the state championship, and won the 165-pound title as a senior in 1951.

Danny made the 1952 Olympic team and placed fifth in free-style competition at the Helsinki Games. One year after graduating from high school, he was ranked fifth in the world, wrestling a style he picked up between graduation and the start of the Olympic trials. When he came back from the Olympics, Danny won back-to-back AAU National titles while serving in the Navy Reserve, and in 1953, became a "Sooner" when he accepted a wrestling scholarship at the University of Oklahoma. Danny took the national title at 177 pounds during his sophomore and junior years (freshmen were "redshirted" back then and not allowed to compete).

Danny made the Olympic team again during his junior year, and in the finals, he lost on a highly controversial call to Nikola Stanchev of Bulgaria, who he was beating handily when time ran out. He was pinned with only two seconds left in the match. He brought home the silver medal from Melbourne and still had his senior year to go.

As a senior, he once again went undefeated and took his third consecutive NCAA championship. He became the only amateur wrestler to make the cover of Sports Illustrated [April 1, 1957]. His record at the University of Oklahoma was a perfect 46-0, with 36 pins, and if that wasn't impressive enough, during his three years of college competition, nobody ever took him down. Danny also piled up 24 consecutive pins, an NCAA record that held for fifteen years, until a young man from Iowa State University named Dan Gable came along and broke it.

During the off-season, Danny decided to try his hand at boxing. Five months later, he was 16-0

with twelve knockouts and the National Golden Gloves champion, making him the only man in history to win national titles in both wrestling and boxing. I can only imagine that if the world of mixed martial arts had been around, Danny would have won that title, as well.

After a short run in the professional boxing ranks (going eight and two), Danny returned to his first love of wrestling and stepped into the ring for LeRoy McGuirk (who also would give me my start as a pro) in 1959. In less than a year, Danny defeated Angelo Savoldi for the NWA world junior heavyweight title, which he would win eight times, as well as far too many other titles to list here.

Danny retired in 1976 after injuries from a car accident cut his career short. In 1995, one of the world's premier wrestling historians, authors, and the founder or WIN magazine and the International Wrestling Institute, Mike Chapman created the Dan Hodge Trophy. Considered the Heisman Trophy

of wrestling, the Dan Hodge Trophy is one of the most sought-after awards in the world of sports. Is there any question as to why we all wanted to emulate Danny Hodge?

My junior year, I was fortunate to maintain my winning streak. Everyone kept referring to me as the defending state heavyweight champion. In a way, I guess that was true, but I knew I was the champion for only one year. If I wanted to keep my title, I would have to win it again. There was no title to defend, only another one to win.

And go after it I did. It was my title, and I planned to keep it until I graduated. I went 18-0 that year and topped off my season by winning my second state high-school championship. The tournament was held in Perry and I won a seven to three decision from Wayne Lively of John Marshall High School in Oklahoma City in the finals of the 190-pound class. Two titles down, one to go.

My senior year proved to be one of the best years of my life. We were still poor, but I don't know if we even realized it at the time. My mom was working at Bob's Grill and I continued working hard to take care of Gerry and to make life easier for mom when she was at home. No matter how busy Mom was or what hours she had to work, she never missed any of my home matches, and very few of those away. She always was there, pushing me on and encouraging me and the other Maroon wrestlers.

Everyone loved her. Almost everyone, that is. The referees learned early to keep out of her way. If she didn't agree with one of their calls, you can be sure they heard about it, and in no uncertain terms. Come to think about it, I believed they loved her, too. After all, where my mom is concerned, what's not to love?

In my final year of high school, our football team had a tremendous season. They won the conference title and played for the state

championship against Ada High School, losing a close game, 21-14, on a neutral field in Oklahoma City. I was chosen All-State fullback once again, but it was bittersweet because I didn't like losing at anything. There was nothing I could do about the game. It was over, and I was aching to get back on the mat.

During my final year at Blackwell, wrestling continued where it had left off the year before. I had the most phenomenal season any wrestler could ever dream of having. I went undefeated for the second year in a row, but this time, I pinned every opponent but one and nobody scored a point on me. No takedowns, no escapes, and no reversals. I wanted that last state title. It was my ticket out of obscurity ... not only for me, but for my mom, Gerry, and my sisters.

I knew if I could take three in a row, I would have a great chance to get a scholarship to Oklahoma or Oklahoma State in wrestling, and possibly football, too. And who could tell? I

might even be the next Danny Hodge.

The state finals that year were held at Blackwell High School. I pinned my way to the finals and took the state championship by pinning the last opponent I would ever see on a high-school mat. It was time to graduate and move on, but I still had to choose what path I wanted to follow; football or wrestling. I had to decide. It was a huge decision for an 18-year-old kid.

Chapter 3
Lambs for the Slaughter

After winning my third straight state wrestling championship, I was heavily recruited by a number of major schools in 1960, for both football and wrestling. The University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, Nebraska, Kansas, and Washington State were among the colleges and universities interested in me. They all were great colleges, but it didn't take me long to narrow it down to two schools. If you are an athlete from Oklahoma, and are of sound mind, you only dream of going to one of two schools — the University of Oklahoma in Norman, or Oklahoma State in Stillwater. That part was fairly easy, but deciding between the two schools wasn't. It cost me many sleepless nights. The dilemma I was in was whether my path

was going to be football or wrestling. If I was going to concentrate on football, there was only one place to be; the University of Oklahoma.

The University of Oklahoma had been playing football since 1885, a mere five years after it was founded. Decades before Barry Switzer came along, the Sooners were coached by Bud Wilkinson. Coach Wilkinson took a group of young men who were little more than a bunch of Okie farm boys and created one of the most feared collegiate football teams the nation had ever seen. Week after week, the country was glued to their television sets and radios every autumn Saturday afternoon as the Sooners wrecked havoc on almost every team that got in their way.

Wilkinson, during a 100-game run, posted a 94-4-2 record and amassed winning streaks of 31 games, and another of 47 games from 1954 to 1956. He restored pride to a state that had been struggling in the nation's eyes since Margaret Borke White's photographs documented the state's

plight during the Great Depression. Wilkinson brought Oklahoma from the dust bowl to the Sugar Bowl and the national championships in 1950, 1955, and 1956. Bud made college football a religion in Oklahoma and heads were finally held high in the Sooner State. What kid, especially one from Oklahoma, would not want to be a part of that?

They were recruiting me as a fullback, but I thought they would probably use me as a tight end or defensive end. Wilkinson had sent assistant football coach Eddie Crowder to convince me that Norman was where I needed to be. The Sooners had also won the NCAA national wrestling championship in 1951, 1952, 1957, and 1960. When he told me I could play football and wrestle, that sounded pretty good to me. I was beginning to think he was right. Norman was the place I wanted to be.

It would have been, except for two things — Myron Roderick and the Oklahoma State

Cowboys. While the University of Oklahoma was winning national football titles in 1955 and 1956, a 137-pound wrestler from Oklahoma State took the national wrestling title in 1954 and returned to take the 130-pound title in 1955 and 1956. He wanted me to wrestle in Stillwater. No football, just wrestling. "Come wrestle for me, Jack, and I'll make you a national champion," said Roderick. I thought I had made up my mind. Now I had to give it some more thought.

If the University of Oklahoma was the national shrine to college football, then Oklahoma State was where the temple of collegiate wrestling was located. Its storied history in wrestling was comparable to what its rival across the state had on the gridiron. Founded as Oklahoma A&M, in the same year as the University of Oklahoma in 1890, the school became a wrestling powerhouse in the '20s and '30s under the guidance of Ed Gallagher.

After starring on the football and track squads,

and graduating from A&M, Gallagher became head coach of the Cowboys in 1916. Although he never wrestled, he took his engineering degree and taught his wrestlers that the use of leverage and brains on the mat was as important to winning as technique and conditioning. It must have been a lesson well-learned since his teams won national titles from 1928 through 1931, tied for the title with Iowa State in 1933, won the title outright in 1934 and 1935, and again every year from 1937 to 1940.

What Wilkinson was to football, Gallagher was to wrestling. One of the only regrets I have about wrestling is that I never had the chance to meet Coach Gallagher. He passed away from pneumonia the year I was born.

Art Griffith took over the Cowboys' wrestling team after the death of Coach Gallagher. Griffith came from coaching at Central High School in Tulsa, where he led them to a record of 94-6 and ten Oklahoma state high-school wrestling championships. At Oklahoma State, he had ten

undefeated seasons, eight NCAA team championships, 27 individual champions, and a record of 78-7-4.

Not only was Griffith a coach of unequaled stature, but he was an innovator, as well. He developed the point system for scoring wrestling matches; two points for a takedown, one point for an escape, and the rest of the points. Up to that point, a match was decided only by a fall or riding time. More importantly to me, not only did he bring innovations to the mat, but he also brought Myron Roderick.

A native of Winfield, Kansas, Coach Roderick came to Oklahoma State after winning back-to-back state titles at Winfield High School. As I mentioned earlier, he won three consecutive NCAA titles (1954, 1955, and 1956) with an overall collegiate record of 42-2. In 1956, he joined Danny Hodge on the Olympic wrestling team and placed fourth, losing a decision to gold medalist Shozo Sasahara of Japan. There was

none better than Coach Roderick.

Roderick was only 21 when he took over as the Cowboys head coach and he was about 24 or 25 when he was recruiting me. One year after he took the reins at Oklahoma State, he led the Cowboys to the national team title, making him the youngest coach in history to win a national collegiate championship in any sport. He replicated the feat seven times, not to mention thirteen Big Eight titles. He was named NCAA coach of the year three times and produced 20 individual NCAA champions and three Olympic champions.

On the number of occasions when Myron came to Blackwell, my mom always said he looked like one of the kids. He spent a lot of time with me and my mother and did all he could to convince me that if I wanted to wrestle, there was only one place for me ... and that was in Stillwater.

As much as I wanted to wrestle for Coach Roderick, the lure of football and wrestling was

stronger. Coach Wilkinson came to our home and sat next to me as I signed a letter of intent to attend the University of Oklahoma. Coach Bud Wilkinson was like a god in Oklahoma, and I was sitting there beside him having my picture taken. I just couldn't tell him no.

A few other factors swayed me towards the University of Oklahoma. One was that my hero, Danny Hodge, had wrestled there. Working out in the same mat room he did every day, and wearing the same colors he sported, was what I had dreamed about for years. Another factor was how easily my head was turned at being courted so heavily by Coach Crowder. That was before the days of the strict NCAA recruiting rules. He asked me if there was anything in particular I wanted. When I told him I had never been up in an airplane, e leased a plane and took me, mom, and my sisters for a ride. He also would fly us to OU ballgames and weekend outings. For a 17-year-old kid, life didn't get any better than that.

Even after signing the letter of intent, I was still at odds with my decision. There was still time for me to change my mind. Coach Roderick kept in touch with me and continued to persuade me to come to State. It was the chance I had been waiting for and I didn't want to make the wrong decision. At the age of eighteen, I knew the choice I was about to make would be the most important one I would ever make. I didn't want to blow it.

I sought out the advice of everyone I could think of that could help me work through my decision and make sure I would end up in the right place. I talked with my mother, my football coach, Travis Rhodes, and my wrestling coach, Bobby Lyons. My mom and Coach Rhodes told me to weigh the pros and cons of both schools in the light of what I wanted to do with my life after I was through with college. Coach Lyons was understanding, but he pushed me towards attending Oklahoma. That is where he had gone to school, and where he had won a national wrestling championship, so naturally, he wanted to steer as

many of his boys there as he could.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized I had made the wrong decision. Two of my high-school teammates, Ronnie Clinton and Ted Ellis, were already at State, and Myron Roderick was one of my heroes. But the main thing that changed my mind was the fact that I wanted to be a professional wrestler, and if wrestling was what I wanted to do with my life, I had to wrestle for Roderick. I know I could have wrestled at OU, but it would have been difficult to participate in two sports.

Conditioning for football and wrestling were completely different and the seasons overlapped to where I would have missed the first part of the wrestling season. If we had a bowl bid, I would miss the better part of the wrestling season. That would, more than likely, eliminate any opportunity I might have of winning a national wrestling title. After thinking it all through, I bolstered my courage and called Coach Crowder. I told him I

had changed my mind and I had decided to go to Oklahoma State because I wanted to concentrate on wrestling. He was upset over my change of heart and kept telling me, "Be sure, Jack. This is important. Don't make a mistake."

I was sure this time. I had made my decision. I was going to wrestle for the best team and the best coach in the country. Now I could finally get some sleep.

Another thing that helped me make up my mind to go to Oklahoma State was the interest Coach Roderick had shown in me personally. It seemed from the outset that he cared for his athletes beyond their abilities on the mat. He knew our family had been struggling financially, and that my mom worked at Bob's Grill to support us. I wanted to make sure my family stayed together, and that my mom would get to see all of my matches in Stillwater. She never missed any of my matches in high school. I wanted her at my matches at State, too.

The distance between Blackwell and Stillwater was about 50 miles. If she was to see my home matches, she would have to take time off from work and travel to the campus. I didn't want her to have to travel all that way and I knew she couldn't afford to take the time off from Bob's Grill. Myron knew of my concerns and found a job for my mom at Murphy's Hardware Store in Stillwater. Thanks to him, our family got to stay together. That, in itself, was the only thing more important to me than wrestling.

Coach Roderick knew I would need money to start my new life as a freshman at OSU, so he helped me secure a summer job working in Junction City, Colorado. Actually, the job as a miner came about as somewhat of an accident. Coach Roderick first set me up, along with Jack Minor and Bob Thompson, two wrestlers from Oklahoma State, with a construction company in Junction City. We drove up there from Stillwater, towing everything the three of us owned in a small U-Haul trailer.

When we arrived in Colorado, we rented a small house. When I say house, it was little more than a miner's shanty, like something you'd see in an old western film. When we arrived, however, we were told the construction company we planned to work for that summer was laying-off workers, rather than hiring new ones. Even with Coach Roderick's connections, there was nothing we could do. We talked about going back to Stillwater, but figured by the time we got back home, it would probably be too late to find a summer job, so we decided to stay and find employment elsewhere in the Junction City area.

It wasn't as easy as we thought. We looked for work for three weeks before finally finding employment in a gold mine on the outskirts of the town. The mine had been abandoned for years, but had just reopened due to a new vein of ore being discovered. So, the three wrestlers from Oklahoma became miners in the summer of 1960. We could hardly wait to get to work. Our meager savings were all but gone and we were

going crazy sitting around the shack all day. Besides, we reasoned, how hard could mining be? We were all champion wrestlers and had been through some of the toughest competition and conditioning known to man (or so we thought). We should be able to handle anything the mine could throw at us.

It still amazes me that how, when you are young, you tend to think you can get through life in a walk, no matter what. When I look back on those early days of my life, part of me believes that thinking you are invulnerable when you are young is a good thing. It makes you believe anything is possible, and if you believe anything is possible, you are willing to try most anything without worry of failure. If I had known then what years of experience have taught me, I never would have attempted most of the things I did. I'm glad I didn't know what I didn't know.

Feeling impervious to disaster or any harm that might come our way, the three of us became

miners. Our job was to pull up the old track that had been in the mine for years so the owners could replace it with a new network of track. The problem was, the old track was under a foot of water. We had to use crowbars to pry it up and then remove it by hand. Located high up in the mountains, it was freezing cold in the mine. We wouldn't see the sun until ten o'clock in the morning and it would disappear sometime around three in the afternoon. If there was a more miserable job to have, we couldn't imagine what it could be.

One day, while working on a particularly stubborn piece of track that wouldn't budge, I swung my crowbar over my head to try and loosen the piece of track. As the crowbar reached its peak, it made contact with the electric wires running above our heads. We had been aware of the lines, but figured they had long been disconnected since we had never seen any of the overhead lights working. The lights may have been off, but the lines were still "hot." As my

crowbar made contact with the wires, the electric shock threw me about ten feet away and I landed hard against the wall of the mine. When I regained consciousness, my buddies showed me my crowbar ... or what was left of it. The jolt had burned a hole completely through it. I just sat there in the water and tried to clear my head. When I regained my senses, I studied the crowbar and realized just how lucky I was to be alive.

I may not have died from electrocution, but I thought I was going to die of starvation. Jack and Bob did, too. We began our trip to Colorado with very little money and, being without work for three weeks, we were eagerly awaiting our first paycheck. Little did we know that we had to work for two weeks before we would see our first check. The harder we worked, the hungrier we became, until we realized we had to find something more substantial than crackers to eat, and we needed to find it fast.

We knew of a rather large sheep ranch that stood

between where we were staying and the mine. Like the dreaded rustlers of old, the three of us, under the cover of darkness, went out to pilfer a sheep. What a comical sight we must have been; Three Oklahoma kids pushing a sheep into a U-Haul trailer. We feasted on lamb for the next six weeks. If you could make something with mutton, we made it. Lamb sausage, lamb hash, lamb stew, and lamb burgers. Lamb, lamb, and more lamb. We were thankful for the food, but overall, it was awful. I haven't had lamb since, but I guess I ate enough of it that summer to last me a lifetime, and then some.

Just before school was scheduled to begin, Jack, Bob, and I got laid off. It was getting close to the time that we needed to head back home, anyway. We reloaded the U-Haul with our worldly good and drove back to Oklahoma, our mining days behind us and full of the anticipation of the coming year on the mat.

Upon arriving back in Oklahoma, my mom, Gerry,

and my two youngest sisters, Shirley and Sharon, moved into a small house a few blocks from campus. My mom started work at Murphy's Hardware and stayed there until she retired. She hadn't been there long before she was promoted to store manager, and then to head buyer, where she got to travel across the country to attend big trade shows, where she would purchase merchandise for the store. She had a great career there and lived in Stillwater until we moved her to Tampa to be close to us. For that, all I can say is, "Thanks, coach."

Chapter 4
The Mat Room

When I arrived at Oklahoma State, I couldn't believe how many people were there. State had more than 20,000 students on campus, which was five times the entire population of Blackwell. Talk about being a face in the crowd. Being a three-time state high-school wrestling champion may have been a big deal in Blackwell, but it didn't mean all that much in Stillwater. I would have to prove myself all over again.

I was ready, but I was limited in how much I could do. I came in as a "red-shirt" freshman. That meant I could practice with the team, but I couldn't compete with the team in matches, since freshmen weren't eligible to compete back then. This wasn't unusual for collegiate athletic teams to do then; or now, for that matter. Freshmen now can compete because

there are fewer scholarships given by schools. They used to give something like 105 football scholarships a year, and now it's down to 85. With fewer athletes, especially in what are considered "minor sports" like wrestling, they need to let as many athletes compete as early and as long as possible.

My mom made sure I understood that going to college was a great opportunity for me, and that I should make the most of it. Class work should be just as important as my work on the mat. I decided to major in history and physical education, with the goal of becoming a teacher and a coach. Some of the most important people in my life had been my coaches, so if professional wrestling didn't turn out to be in the cards, I could teach and still be involved in wrestling, and maybe help influence other athletes like my coaches had influenced me.

As a freshman I didn't get to wrestle much outside of practice. There were a few tournaments for freshmen that I, along with the other "red-

shirts," competed in. I won two tournaments that year; the AAU freshmen tournament in Tulsa and another in Lincoln, Nebraska. While I was in Lincoln, I met a senior who was wrestling at heavyweight who would go on to have a tremendous career on the mat and in the ring — Jim Raschke.

Jim hailed from Omaha, Nebraska, where he played football and basketball at North High School. Much like me, Jim traded the hardwood for the wrestling mat as a sophomore and won the Nebraska State heavyweight championship during his senior year. Upon graduating from high school, Jim entered the University of Nebraska to pursue a degree in biology and play football and wrestle. In 1962, during his senior year, Jim won the Big Eight Conference wrestling title at heavyweight. The next year, Jim won a spot on the National Greco-Roman wrestling team and captured a bronze medal at the World Greco-Roman wrestling championships in Halsingborg, Sweden. He was only the second American ever

to win a medal in Greco-Roman.

When he was drafted into the U.S. Army, Jim continued to wrestle and won the AAU national titles in both freestyle and Greco in 1964, as well as back-to-back gold medals in the Army and Inter-service wrestling titles. He also won a berth on the 1964 U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling team, but a hyper-extended elbow eliminated Jim's chances of competing in Tokyo. Mustering out of the army, Jim had a short stint as a junior high-school teacher before one of the legendary Dusek brothers, Joe, met Jim and introduced him to Verne Gagne.

Impressed by Jim and his wrestling resume' (who wouldn't be?), Verne began training Jim. In September 1966, he entered the ring for the first time. A year later "Jim Raschke" would enter the ring for the last time. He would return as the nefarious "Baron von Raschke, a "Nazi" heel [wrestling term for 'bad guy'] who brandished his iron claw and ended his interviews in his gravelly

voice and broken English. "Dat is all the people need to know."

Jim is a man of great intelligence and courtly manners. Seeing him outside the ring in a suit and horned-rimmed glasses, one would think he was a college professor, rather than one of the most feared men on the mat or in the ring. We had some great matches for the world title in St. Louis. I don't know if Jim remembers meeting me on the desolate plains of Lincoln at the tournament that winter afternoon, but I never forgot it.

The match during my freshman year that probably gained me the most recognition was the annual freshman-varsity dual meet. I was matched up against a four-time Colorado state wrestling champion, Bob Thompson. Bob was a junior and had a great deal of experience on the mat. Coach Roderick really wanted to test me in the match. He figured that, since I wasn't actively competing, I wasn't in the best condition. He thought the starting-team members were probably in better

shape than I was. At least, that's what almost everyone thought.

The matches for the freshman-varsity meet were six minutes in duration. Roderick, unbeknownst to me, set my match against Thompson for nine minutes, thinking I would blow up or tire out, at which time Bob would pin me. I didn't pin Bob, but I dominated the match, and I don't remember if Bob even scored any points. If he did, there weren't many.

At the end of the nine minutes, my hand was raised. Coach Roderick and the fans in attendance were in shock. I guess everyone thought I didn't have much of a chance. Everyone but me, that is. Bob took the decision exceptionally hard. He packed his bags, quit the team, and moved back to Colorado. I couldn't wait to get on the mat my sophomore year. Like most kids my age, I thought I was invincible.

Practices were brutal. Coach Roderick

demanded the best from us all the time. The two hours we spent in the mat room was as close to hell on earth as you could get. The mat room was on the main floor of Gallagher Hall, named, of course, for the legendary former wrestling coach. The room was as long as two wrestling mats and about as wide as one. There were no windows and no ventilation. Likewise, no quarter was given and none was asked. The room would get so hot that, after fifteen minutes, the mat would be so wet from sweat you could hardly stand up. Unlike most mat rooms today, there was no padding on the walls. As Bobby Douglas put it, our only padding was the paint on the walls. We would shoot takedowns and smack against one wall and then another. The facilities notwithstanding, our teams during those years produced some of the greatest wrestlers the country has ever seen.

Some of the best athletes our country had to offer wrestled inside those storied walls, every single day. Almost every weight class contained an all-

American or a national champion. Just walking into the room was akin to taking your life into your hands. The scriptures say, "As iron sharpens another, one man sharpens another." The Oklahoma State Cowboys were honed to a razor's edge.

There also was a great mutual respect for everyone there — not only because we faced each other each day and knew how tough we all were, but because we knew what it took to not only survive, but to excel in that room. We had to work hard to have our hands raised against our opponents. We shared a common goal and pushed each other past any preconceived limits we had about our endurance or abilities. Few teams could equal our resolve and no team beat us.

Practices began precisely at three o'clock. Coach Roderick would pick five or six of us every day before practice, line us up, and shoot takedowns with us. He didn't weigh much more than 140 pounds, but there was no doubt that he

ruled the roost. From our 115-pounder, all the way to Joe James, our heavyweight, I don't think he lost many takedowns.

I do know of one takedown he lost, and that was to me. I don't want to come across like I'm bragging, but I'm proud of the fact I took coach Roderick down, even though it was only one time.

Roderick had the most beautiful fireman's carry takedown I had ever seen. It was my favorite takedown, as well. I used it throughout my high-school career and I tried to copy Coach Roderick's style as closely as possible. When we would shoot, we both were looking for opportunities to use the fireman's carry.

On the day I won the takedown over Coach, I didn't use a fireman's carry, but a double leg. As we circled each other, I stepped in, hit him with a high double, and drove him into the mat. As soon as we hit, I thought, "Oh, my God! What did I just do?"

I got off him and stepped back, wondering what he would do to me when he got to his feet. He stood up, looked over at me, and yelled, somewhat angrily, "Okay, let's get practice started." For the next two hours, he took out his frustration (and possibly some embarrassment) on everyone.

About 90 percent of our practices consisted of takedowns. We would start with three to five minutes of conditioning and then pair off to work for an hour on takedowns, switching partners every ten minutes. I'm not being arrogant when I say there was no better team in the country on their feet, thanks to Coach Roderick. We would spend the remainder of the two hours wrestling at full speed and working on escapes. The escapes Coach Roderick had us practice were the two most basic: sit-outs and stand ups. Roderick didn't like the switch.

The switch would give you two points, whereas a sit-out and stand-up would only give you one point for the escape. However, a sit-out and stand-up

put us back on our feet, where we were at our best. We then would face our opponent and take them down. One point for the escape, two points for the takedown. Three points in all, compared to only two we would have gotten from the switch. Not only did this philosophy give us an extra point, it gave us a psychological advantage that most teams didn't have.

If your opponent can't hold you on the mat — you escape and then take them down — you take part of their heart. They begin to think, "Man, this guy is tough. I can't keep him down and he beats me on my feet. How can I win?" When they start thinking along those lines, you have won. The pin or decision is only a formality. That style served us well, especially in close matches. If we had trouble riding someone, or they were particularly good at escapes, we would just take them down, let them get up, and take them down again. We would trade two points for one all day long. We would always go for the pin, but in tough matches, a decision would fare just as well.

My regular workout partner was our heavyweight, Joe James. Joe was from Chicago and was runner-up for the national title in 1962 at 191 pounds, losing to Wayne Baughman from Oklahoma. He moved up to heavyweight in 1963, at which time he placed third in the nationals behind Larry Kristoff from Southern Illinois and two-time champion Jim Nance from Syracuse. Nance then went on to an outstanding professional football career with the Boston Patriots.

Joe had the widest shoulders and the smallest waist on any athlete I had ever seen. Joe was about six-foot-three and weighed 221 pounds of pure muscle. There was no fat on his body. The guys in the muscle magazines looked sickly compared to Joe. He was as cut as anyone who had ever had stepped onto the mat. The most amazing thing about Joe, however, was that it was all natural. At that point in his life, he had never lifted weights.

Even today, when you speak his name in wrestling circles, it almost embodies the toughness he displayed on the mat. The last I heard, he is living and doing well in Chicago, but for awhile, there was a silly rumor that he had lost his life in a fall from a 10-story building. Who knows where these rumors begin or how they spread. The only reason I bring that up, however, is that when one of my former teammates heard the story, he laughed and said, "If Joe James fell from a ten-story building, the only thing that would have been hurt was the sidewalk."

And that was the guy I had to face every day for two hours. One day at practice, he threw me in the mat room. My leg caught a corner of the cinder-block wall, which ripped a huge gash in my leg that required ten stitches. I was back on the mat two days later at practice and Joe threw me again. I hit the same corner, the same leg, broke open the stitches, and had to have it re-stitched. Whatever punishment I took from Joe, though, I gave back just as much. Remember, I

thought I was invincible. I thought I couldn't be beaten, even by Joe James.

When we would lock up, Joe would hold his hands out and try to interlock fingers as a test of strength. I would challenge him for a while, but the strength in his hands was tremendous. He would crush my hands to a point where I couldn't close my hands after practice. Joe thought that was funny; I didn't. As much as I would try to avoid it, he would find a way to lock up my fingers. I got so frustrated at one point that I told him, "Dammit, Joe. Cut it out. I can't even close my hands. The next time you do that, I'm going to do something about it."

Joe said, "Okay, Jack. I'm sorry. I won't do it anymore."

He had made that promise before, but he had always broken it. Like I said, Joe was tough, and he thought it was funny.

A short time later, we locked up ... and Joe once again interlaced his fingers with mine. I threw my head back and head-butted him, catching him square in the mouth. I spilt both his lips, bloodied this mouth, and knocked out one of his front teeth. He let go of my hands, bent down, picked up his tooth from the mat, placed it on a ledge, and locked up with me again. He never said a word about it. However, he never did mess with my hands again. He just wrestled.

Chapter 5
The Sweat Box

I was anticipating my sophomore year more than I had ever anticipated anything in my life. I was finally going to get back on the mat in actual competition. However, as things worked out, I would have to wait even yet another year. I had spent the summer working construction as I usually did. I was in top shape and was aching to get back to school and into the mat room.

During my freshman year at Oklahoma State, I met Karen Henson, fell in love, and got married. Not too long after, she surprised me with the news that she was pregnant, and our first child was due to arrive sometime in the spring. I was excited about becoming a father, but I was concerned about the fact that I would probably have to quit school and stop wrestling in order to support my young family. And that's exactly what happened. I

couldn't find a job in Stillwater, so I had to drop out of school and find a way to put food on the table and buy diapers.

Being a college town, Stillwater didn't have a surplus of employment opportunities, so Karen and I moved to Oklahoma City, about 100 miles from Oklahoma State. I found a job as a carpenter's helper and tried to put Oklahoma State and wrestling out of my mind. I thought the distance I put between myself and Gallagher Hall would help me focus on my new job and my new life. It didn't. I had a difficult time getting over the fact that everything I had ever dreamed of was going down the drain. I had to find a way back; to support my family, finish college, and win the national championship. My hopes and goals didn't seem to be all that promising at the time.

During the time I was working in Oklahoma City, I wanted nothing to do with wrestling. It was just too difficult to have to face the fact that I was no longer a part of the Cowboy's wrestling

team. However, the more I tried to forget it, the more I thought about. With every two-by-four I carried, and every footing I dug, my mind was on takedowns and a national championship. It didn't seem like it was ever going to happen, but I hadn't resigned myself to throwing in the towel.

Fortunately, I wasn't the only one who felt that way. My teammates called regularly to see how we were doing. Coach Roderick also would call and made frequent trips to see me. He kept my spirits up by reminding me that my scholarship was waiting for me, and that he wanted me back. He told me over and over, "Don't worry about this year. Do what you have to do here. I'll keep looking for a job for you back in Stillwater. You will be wrestling again next year."

I kept working and saving my money, with no thought in my mind other than getting ready to move back to school.

Roderick was right. The next year, I was back in

Stillwater, and I couldn't have been happier. Our daughter Debbie was born on November 26 and the three of us moved into an apartment close to the Oklahoma State campus. I attended class, wrestling practice, and worked out in the mat room whenever I had a chance.

The job I found wasn't glamorous or it didn't pay much, but it was a job, and I needed one badly. After class and practice, I would drive to an office building not far from State to clean toilets, mop and wax the floors, and empty the trash. Even after I was runner-up for the national championship in 1964 and won the national championship in 1965, I continued to go to my custodial job every day after practice.

People would ask me why I was doing that. I had wrestled on ABC's Wide World of Sports, had my name in countless newspaper and magazine articles, and had been recognized as one of the best athletes in the country, but every evening at six o'clock, I would go mop the floors and clean the

restrooms. All I could tell them was that I loved it. It was a job and I was thankful to have it. I did that until I finished school and turned pro. It was an inauspicious start to a ring career, but looking back, it has made me all the more appreciative of the events that would follow.

Wrestling practice commenced sometime in October, about a month before the actual competition began. My normal weight was about 220 pounds, but Coach Roderick wanted me to wrestle in the 191-pound class, which is where he thought I would be at my best. One of the thoughts about weight-cutting is that you could maintain the strength you had at 220, but you were faster and had more endurance at the lighter weight. That would have been a great advantage, except for the fact that everyone did it.

Losing 30 pounds was a struggle. I would limit my eating to salads only and would restrict myself to just one glass of water a day. I would drink a quarter of it at a time throughout the day. Every

morning, I would wake up with my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I also would run and work out like a maniac.

Meets began around eight o'clock in the evening and we would weigh in around two o'clock in the afternoon. Many times, I would make weight at 191, but by eight o'clock that night, I would once again weigh 200 pounds. As the season progressed and I was in the best shape I possibly could be, it became more and more difficult to cut those last couple of pounds to make weight.

I would keep my weight at 200 pounds during the week and would slowly cut the nine pounds before the meet. To lose those last nine pounds, I would go into the basement of the field house where there was an old dirt track. I would put on a plastic sweat suit and as many other sweat clothes as I could get on and run for an hour or so. My conditioning improved to a point where I would run for an hour without breaking a sweat.

There was a small broom closet in the corner of the basement. When I say small, I mean you could only fit in a couple of brooms, a mop and bucket, and me ... if I got rid of the brooms. It had a small electric heater in the corner, which I would turn on. I would sit in there for hours, bundled up in my sweat gear, trying to break a sweat and lose the last two pounds I would usually need to make weight.

I never failed to make weight. I wasn't going to work as hard I did and sacrifice what my family and I had, to blow my opportunity to reach my goal because of a few pounds. I wasn't the only wrestler to use the "sweat box," as we affectionately called it. Coach Roderick was adamantly against me or anyone else using it. To his credit, it wasn't a very smart way to lose weight. It was effective, but not smart. It wasn't healthy to put your body through that amount of stress. Today, there are strict rules governing how a wrestler can lose weight, and any athlete or coach worth his measure makes sure those rules

are followed to the letter.

Roderick relentlessly kept after us to make weight. He badgered us constantly to make sure that, when we stepped on the scales, we wouldn't have to expend any energy to lose those last few pounds on the day of the match. He had a good point. However, we would do whatever we needed to avoid facing the coach's wrath by missing weight ... and that meant spending time in the closet. There were times when he would open the door to the closet and catch me in there. "Jack, what are you doing in there? Dammit! You're supposed to already be on weight."

Coach Roderick never admitted it to me, but I had my suspicions that he knew the "sweat box" from the inside, as well as the outside, and that he paid it a visit more than once during his tenure on the mat at State. I don't think he ever would have admitted it, even if I had asked him. I never did and he never told me.

I don't think I could ever repay Myron for all he did for my family and me. He went far beyond what any coach would normally do for an athlete under his charge. He never was easy on me or on any of the athletes under his charge. He was always pushing us; always driving us to be the best. He taught us to never settle for second best; champions all. He knew what he was talking about. He had lived it and he wanted no less for his wrestlers. His influence and teaching stayed with me throughout my life.

A few years ago, my wife Jan and I were back in Oklahoma, visiting my children. Coach Roderick saw my son-in-law having breakfast in the restaurant of the hotel in which we were staying. After a brief conversation, my son-in-law, Craig, told coach I was in town and staying in the hotel. "Great! I want to go and see him right now," Roderick said.

"No, coach," Craig told him, "Jack got in late last night and I'm sure they are still asleep. He'll be

furious if you wake him up."

Coach Roderick, being Coach Roderick, didn't let a minor thing like my sleep get in the way of him seeing one of his wrestlers. He walked over to the front desk and got our room number. When he reached our room, he pounded on the door and yelled, "Brisco, get up! Weigh-in is in five minutes. Get out here." I had been fast asleep, but as soon as I heard coach's voice, I sat straight up in my bed and ran to the door. In a way, it was funny. I had more than 30 years of flashbacks running through my head all at once. Coach was calling and I had better be on weight. I opened the door to see Myron standing there with a big grin on his face.

Thirty-some-odd years since I last stepped on the mat for him, hundreds of thousands of miles of travel, and with two world championships to my credit, I still was jumping when he called. I may have been the two-time world heavyweight champion, but he still was my coach. And he

always will be.

Our second dual meet my junior year was against Colorado State. I was matched against Ken Hines, their 191-pounder. Ken had placed fifth at the national championships the previous year. I was more nervous than I thought possible. He was the first all-American I had ever faced. We wrestled to a draw. I don't know if I was more disappointed that I didn't win, or happier that I was able to earn a draw. Either way, I hadn't lost.

The 1964 NCAA wrestling championships were held on the campus of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. By my junior year, I had the best fireman's carry takedown in the country. I felt confident going into the tournament. I knew that if the right calls were made, I would end up in the finals, wrestling for the 191-pound national championship.

We were the odds-on-favorites to regain the national team championship. Going into the 1964

National Championships, the Cowboys were riding a victory streak of eight national titles out of the previous ten years, including six in a row spanning from 1954 to 1959. In 1963, as six-time defending champions, we finished fourth, tied with Syracuse and Pittsburgh with 32 team points. The University of Oklahoma took the title that year with 48 points, followed by Iowa State and the University of Michigan.

Wrestling was the third sport to crown a national champion, shortly behind track-and-field and swimming. Since 1929 (a year after the first NCAA wrestling championship tournament), the Oklahoma State Cowboys wrestling team won 21 national team titles, was runner-up once, finished third twice, fourth three times, and fifth once. In the 15-year span from 1929 through 1948 the Cowboys won fourteen out fifteen national championships.

No team score was kept in 1936 at the national tournament held at Washington and Lee University

in Lexington, Virginia. In many of the cases, the Cowboys missed the national title by just a few team points. That was how competitive the national collegiate wrestling teams were back then. During those 37 years from 1928 to 1965, our in-state rivals at the University of Oklahoma won five national championships and finished as runner-up six times; five of those times to us

Our team that year stood with the best Oklahoma State had ever produced. Great wrestlers like Dennis Dutsch, Yojiro Uetake, Jim Rogers, Mike Reding, Bob Zweiacher, Bill Harlow, and Joe James all graced the mat wearing the orange and black.

We had already sewn up the national team championship, but that was only part of the reason I was in Ithaca. I came there to win the nationals at 191 pounds. I did well in the competition and pinned my way to the finals with victories over Robert Spaly of Michigan, Sven Holm of Oklahoma, and Ronald Parr of Wisconsin. One

more match to go, but it would be the biggest match of my life. If I won, I would be the national champion.

Harry Houska was an Ohio State high-school wrestling champion before he stepped on the mat and wrestled for the Bobcats at Ohio University. He had been runner-up at 177 pounds in the 1963 National championship held at Kent State in Ohio and had moved up to 191 for the 1964 championships. It was my first chance at the championship and I planned to take the title back to Stillwater with me. Harry had other plans. He had been as close as anyone to winning a national title the year before and he had no intentions of failing again.

I had watched Harry throughout the tournament and knew I was in for a tough match, but I had no doubt that I was just as good as Houska and that I could win it all. Harry had watched my matches, as well. I was known for my fireman's carry and he was prepared to counter it when I shot in for the

takedown. The fact he prepared for it didn't bother me, but how he readied himself for it did.

When we walked out onto the mat, I had 22 collegiate matches under my belt, a 21-0-1 record, and had pinned about 50 percent of my opponents. I had done extremely well, especially considering I sat out my freshman year as a "red shirt" and missed my entire sophomore year. With one more match to go, there was a mere nine minutes, or less, standing between me and the national championship.

We walked on the mat, met in the center, and shook hands. The referee blew his whistle and yelled, "Wrestle." I had planned to move in on Houska at the opening whistle and take the match to him. My plan was to take him down with my fireman's carry, ride him, and try to wear him down and work for the pin. When I went to tie up with him, I put my hand on his shoulder to set up the fireman's. To my utter surprise, my hand slipped off. I took a quick step back and looked at

my hand. I could see Vaseline on it. Houska had covered his shoulders and arms with Vaseline so I would slip off when I tried to set up my takedown.

I turned to the official and asked him to stop the match. The official walked over to Harry, checked his arms, and called for a towel to wipe off the Vaseline. Of course, you can't just wipe off Vaseline. It has to be washed off with soap and water. There was no time for that, so the official wiped off Houska, checked his arms, and gave him the okay to continue. The official did get most of it off, but it still was on his skin.

I had always wondered why Harry's nickname was "the snake." After the Vaseline incident, I thought I had figured it out, but I was wrong. It wasn't that he was as slippery as a snake, it was the fact that he sounded like one when he wrestled. When we resumed wrestling, we circled each other. I could hear Harry going, "Ssst, ssst." He was hissing at me like a snake. I never had an opponent do that to me. Not only had I

never heard anyone do anything like that, but I had never even heard of anyone doing anything like that. I thought, "This guy is crazy."

At one point in the match, Harry circled to my right. When he did, I saw an opening and shot in to take him down with my fireman's carry. I locked it in and, as I dropped to my hip to take him over, I slipped off and he pancaked me, dropping me flat on the mat on my stomach. It was all I could do to hang on to the single-leg I had gotten in the attempt to get the fireman's. He had me stretched out, flat on my stomach, and was working like hell to get behind me. I clung onto his leg like my life depended on it. We struggled for about 45 seconds. Just before the whistle blew to end the first period, I lost my grip and he spun around behind me for the takedown. The score: 2-0, Houska.

To start the second period, I chose the top referee's position. When the whistle blew, Harry did everything he could to escape. I rode him for

most of the second period; about a minute and a half, I think. He eventually maneuvered to the edge of the mat and got out of bounds. The referee broke us up and brought us back to the center of the mat. Once again, I took the top position. When the referee blew the whistle, Harry, — as quick as his nickname would lead you to believe — reversed me. It was perfect timing on his part. I managed to hit a stand up and escaped as time ran out for the second period. The score: 4-1, Houska.

Taking the top position in the second period put me in the bottom position to start the third period. Houska rode me through most of the period and I worked as hard as I ever had to escape. Vaseline or no Vaseline, Harry was a monster on the mat. Towards the end of the period, I finally escaped from Houska with a sit-out and gained another point. The score: 4-2, Houska.

We kept shooting in on each other and countering each other's every move. I knew time was running

out, so I made one final desperate shot at a takedown. I shot in for a single-leg. I held onto it to gain control and keep Harry from cross-facing me and getting behind for the takedown. The match ended with Harry and me fighting for the last takedown. After the match, I realized that, even though I would have taken him down, it wouldn't have been enough. Harry gained one point riding time, which gave him five points and I still would have had only four points. I was only five seconds away from gaining an additional point for riding time, but even that wouldn't have helped. Harry beat me five to two.

When the official raised Harry's hand, I was devastated. It was the first match I had lost since I was a sophomore in high school. On top of that, it was the first time the finals of the NCAA wrestling championships had been broadcast live on ABC's Wide World of Sports. Talk about the agony of defeat.

The one bright spot of the day was that our

Cowboy team regained the national team title. We scored the highest team points in the tournament's history — 87 points — beating the previous record by ten points, a record held by the Oklahoma State Cowboys of 1957.

I have to say I did lose to a better man that day. I have no way of knowing whether or not things would have turned out differently if Harry hadn't greased up his arms. Houska had proved himself on the mat for many years. He had the title and I was, for the first time in my wrestling career, runner-up. Harry went on to continue an outstanding career on the mat. He won a gold medal at the Pan American Games in 1967 and placed fourth in the world championships in New Delhi, India. Upon retiring from active competition, he became head wrestling coach at his alma mater, Ohio University, in 1968 and was named the university's Athlete of the Decade 1960-1970.

We did have two national champions that

day. Yojiro Uetake won the 130-pound title by defeating Jim Hanson of Colorado. Yojiro would go on to win two more national titles and the NCAA outstanding wrestler award in both 1965 and 1966. He also captured two Olympic gold medals for Japan, in 1964 and 1968. Joe James took the heavyweight honors by beating Bob Billberg of Moorehead State.

I wasn't the only Cowboy who fell short in the finals. Mike Reding, our 147-pounder, lost to Jerry Stanley of Oklahoma. At 167 pounds, Bob Zweiacher lost to Donald Millard of Southern Illinois. Bill Harlow was defeated by Dean Lahr of Colorado at 177 pounds. Dennis Dutsch placed fifth at 123 pounds, as did Jim Rogers at 137 pounds.

After my match, I was as disheartened as I had ever been. Coach Roderick found me in the dressing room and told me to stop worrying about it. It was over and there was nothing I could do to change it. "If you work harder next year, you could

take it all, and this year's tournament will be nothing but a bad memory." He also told me we had just won the national championship and that I had helped bring the team there. "Stop pouting and smile," he ordered. "You had a great season and you are part of the national championship team. Let's get ready for next year."

I took coach's words to heart, but the loss stayed with me for years. I didn't dwell on it, but it was in the back of my mind for a long time. The loss did serve as a catalyst for me and the 1965 season. It's amazing how one loss, against our 21 wins and one draw, would be the one match I focused on, but that's a part of any competitor's makeup. I think any champion will tell you the same. It's as much "you against you" on the mat as it is you against any other opponent.

The 1965 season was almost identical to the previous year. I finished the year undefeated and was in the best shape of my life. Even though Coach Roderick told me to forget my loss to

Houska in the finals the year before, it remained in the back of my mind. I wasn't going to let anything like that happen again. As Vince Lombardi said "There is no second place." If any wrestler — or any athlete for that matter — tells you they were happy with second place, they are either lying or they lacked the competitive drive that could have taken them to a championship.

Our team that year was as strong as ever. I don't think many doubted we were the favorite to repeat as national team champions. We were loaded from top to bottom. The team that year was comprised of Coach Roderick, Tadaaki Hatta, Dennis Dutsch, Yojiro Uetake, Gene Davis, Bobby Douglas, Mike Reding, Bill Harlow, and Russ Winer. Of this group, only Yojiro was a returning national champion, but we had three runners-up returning, as well as a couple of other all-Americans. We were as prepared as a team could be.

The championship tournament was held at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. I was

undefeated my senior year and, with the exception of three, pinned all my opponents. I almost repeated my tournament run, as well. I managed to pin everyone I wrestled until the semi-finals, when I met Larry Lane from Colorado State.

The only reason I didn't pin him was because Larry wouldn't wrestle me. He just "turtled" out. Turtling is where a wrestler tucks his head into his shoulders and curls up so you can't turn him over onto his back. Larry was not wrestling to win. In fact, he wasn't wrestling much at all. He spent the match trying to avoid getting pinned. He succeeded. I won an easy decision, but I thought it was a terrible match. Terrible or not, I was back in the finals. After college, Larry went into coaching and teaching in New Mexico. He later got into pro wrestling and wrestled as "Cowboy" Larry Lane for Dory and Terry Funk in Amarillo and Stu Hart in Calgary.

In the finals for the 191-pound championship, I wrestled Dan Pernat from the University of

Wisconsin. At the opening whistle, I shot in with the fireman's carry and took him down, riding him throughout the first period. I won the toss to pick my position for the second period and chose down. As soon as the whistle blew, I hit a stand up, turned, and took Dan down to his back and pinned him. When the referee slapped the mat, I felt a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. I shook Dan's hand and the official raised mine in the air.

I felt so elated to stand in the middle of the mat as the Division I National Collegiate wrestling champion. It happened a year later than I had planned, but I guess that made it all the sweeter. During that year, I had learned how to push myself harder than I thought possible and to focus on a single goal. As the official raised my hand, tears rolled down my cheeks. If that wasn't the greatest feeling in the world, I would be hard pressed to know what it could have been. Coach Roderick came running up to me, hugged me, and lifted me off the floor. He said almost the exact

same words Coach Hetrick said to me seven years earlier after I won my first state championship, "See, I told you if you wrestled for me I would make you a national champion."

"You were right, Coach. Yes, you did. Yes, you did."

The team title came down to the last match of the finals. This time, however (thankfully), the burden wasn't on my shoulders. Joe James had graduated the year before, so our heavyweight now was Russ Winer. Russ surprised a lot of people that year by doing as well as he did. Joe's shoes were tough to fill and there was a lot of pressure on Russ. Coach Roderick pushed him on, repeating over and over, "How bad do you want it? How bad do you want it?" There was no question regarding how badly Russ wanted it, but returning champion Jim Nance of the Syracuse Orangemen was a formidable foe. Nance took the match, the national championship, and with it gave Iowa State the 1965 NCAA team championship.

The finals that year were a mirror image of the year before. In 1964, I was runner-up at 191 and my team took the National Championship. In 1965, I was the champion and the Cowboys took second place, losing to Iowa State by only one point; 87 to 86. We had more national champions than they did, but they placed more and piled up their points throughout the tournament. We had done pretty much the same thing the year before. I wasn't the only national champion that year from Oklahoma State. Tadaaki Hatta won the 115-pound championship by beating Glenn McMinn of Arizona State and Yohiro Uetake won his second of three NCAA titles by defeating Joe Petorie of Lehigh University. Yohiro also was named Outstanding Wrestler of the competition. More than likely, we would have won it all if it hadn't been for a bizarre incident involving our 147-pounder, Bobby Douglas.

Saying Bobby Douglas is a legend in amateur wrestling is a vast understatement. A native of Ohio, Bobby was the first black Ohio State

wrestling champion, winning the 112-pound championship for Bridgeport High School. From there he moved on to compete for West Liberty State College, where he took the NAIA 130-pound national title. A few weeks later, he was runner up for the 130-pound division I title, losing to Mickey Martin of Oklahoma in 1963.

He won a total of five national championships, won the Olympic Trials on two different occasions, placed fourth in the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, and was runner-up for the world freestyle title. Bobby was chosen captain for the 1968 U.S. freestyle wrestling team for the Mexico City Games and captured the silver medal. He retired from active competition in 1970, the same year he was named the nation's outstanding wrestler, accumulating an incredible career record of 303-17-7, a winning percentage of 95.3 percent.

Bobby went on to have an amazing coaching career at Arizona State and Iowa State, winning the NCAA team title in 1988 while at Arizona. He

coached the 1992 Olympic team and coached great wrestlers like Dan Severn and Cael Sanderson. His talents extend far past the mat, as he has written five books on his famous wrestling techniques and has been awarded countless honors for his coaching and leadership. Very few wrestlers who have won national titles can equal or surpass their success on the mat in the coaching arena. Wrestling is fortunate to have Bobby Douglas as one of its finest ambassadors and I have counted it as a great honor to have been his teammate.

Bobby transferred to Oklahoma State in 1964 as a red-shirt sophomore and became our starting 147-pounder the following year. In his first match in the 1965 National championships, Bobby wrestled Dan DeVito from Southern Illinois. Bobby was top seed in his weight class and, by everyone's prediction, he would take the tournament by storm. In the opening period, he shot in for a single leg and DeVito's knee hit him in the temple, knocking him out cold. Out cold, but still on his

feet! His renowned iron will manifested itself that night. Fighting solely on instinct, Bobby finished the match and had his hand raised at its conclusion. The doctor at mat side checked on Bobby and said, "No more wrestling for him in the tournament."

It was the first time I saw Coach Roderick weep. Coach was weeping for Bobby, not only out of concern for his well-being, but for the fact that he would not see his goal of being a division one champion realized. We all were concerned for Bobby, our teammate and brother.

Bobby said the first thing he remembered after that was waking up in the hospital in Cheyenne Wyoming, wondering what happened and who had hit him with a sledge hammer.

Of course, not being able to compete, Bobby had been eliminated from the tournament. Even if Bobby hadn't won the tournament, but had only won one more match, it would have given us the

points needed to win the team championship. Bobby was crushed, which was only natural. He was a competitor and a champion, and he never took any defeat lightly, especially one resulting from a freak accident. I think it's important for people to understand that Bobby didn't cost us the title. We could have picked up points by winning other weight classes, but we didn't. Bobby didn't see it that way, but that's the truth. He was, and always will be, one of the finest wrestlers and true gentlemen of the mat.

It was a strange twist of fate that Iowa State beat us for the national title. We beat them for the Big Eight title a few weeks before. In fact, we not only beat them, we destroyed them. It was disappointing to have them take "our" national title by one point.

In wrestling, like most athletic contests, when the contest is over, it is put behind you. There are no hard feelings on who won or lost. You can't

change the past, so you all become wrestlers with a common bond — not Oklahoma State wrestlers or Iowa State wrestlers; just wrestlers.

We happened to be staying at the same hotel as Iowa State. We all got together and sat around drinking beer and swapping stories. Sometime during the evening, I had a conversation with Veryl Long, the Iowa State 147-pounder who had won the National title. As we drank our beer, I told him he was the luckiest man on earth. If Bobby hadn't been hurt, Veryl would have been the runner-up, rather than the national champion. Veryl, to his credit, heartily agreed, which made him all the more a champion in my eyes. It takes a real man to not only admit to something like that, but to listen to someone else say it without getting upset.

Amateur wrestling was over for me, but there still was a Brisco on the Cowboys wrestling team. Gerry had been recruited by Coach Roderick to come to Oklahoma State after his successful high-school career. It had nothing to do

with Gerry being my brother. Myron was out to win and he wasn't going to have just anyone wearing the black and orange of Oklahoma State, no matter what his last name might be or who his brother was. Myron recruited Gerry solely on Gerry's ability and performance on the mat.

Unbeknownst to me, Mom, and Coach Roderick, Gerry had planned to wrestle and study education at the University of Colorado. In fact, he had a full scholarship already guaranteed. But that, of course, is something that couldn't be kept secret for long. As soon as Gerry told us about his plans, we moved into action. The three of us told Gerry in no uncertain terms that there was no way he was going to the University of Colorado, especially when Coach Roderick had wanted him at OU. Colorado was out and Oklahoma State was in, period.

That fall, Gerry entered the hallowed halls of Oklahoma State.

My wrestling eligibility was finished, but I still was fifteen hours short of graduating. I could have taken a few classes in the summer and graduated by the end of the year, but I was ready to move on to the next step; trading the amateur mat for the professional ring.

Chapter 6
First Match

Having accomplished what I had set out to do, my amateur days on the mat came to an end that March in Laramie. The road I had taken had a few more twists and turns than I would have imagined, but I made it happen. I believed I could put my mind to anything I wanted to achieve and accomplish it. At that point, I wanted to be a professional wrestler more than anything. In fact, it had since the first time I stepped onto the amateur mat in Blackwell.

Professional wrestling aired on our local TV station, WKY-TV Channel 4, every Saturday. Like most fans in Oklahoma, I worshipped Danny Hodge. He was the idol of nearly everyone in the state, wrestling fan or not, and I was certainly no exception. At times, I dreamed of standing side by side with him in the ring in front of thousands of fans, turning back the challenge of an evil tag team

bent on our destruction. Outside of my daydreams and the weekly TV matches, my wrestling world only went as far as the local Kress Drug Store, where I would sit every Saturday and read the latest wrestling magazines. I knew the backgrounds of many of the legends — Danny Hodge, Lou Thesz, Buddy Rogers, Pat O'Connor, and scores of others. I read all about their matches, life on the road, and the titles they won. I wanted to be a part of that world.

As long as there has been amateur and professional wrestling, there has been a divide that rarely has been bridged. Not only are the mat and the ring in two different worlds, but they might as well exist in two different galaxies. Many amateur wrestlers see themselves as purists who would never lower themselves to give professional wrestling a second look. They think they are above the wrestlers who choose to make a living at it. I think those of us who have participated in both the amateur and the professional ranks have a more realistic view of wrestling.

Many of the pros wrestled amateur and excelled at it. Danny Hodge, Dick Hutton, Verne Gagne, Tim Woods, Bob Backlund, Dale Lewis, Abe Jacobs, Kurt Angle, Brock Lesnar, and many others were champions on the amateur mat, and transferred that skill into lucrative ring careers. Some of the other pros wrestled a bit as amateurs, but a good portion of them had never seen a mat or an amateur match in their life. Whether or not they had competed on the mat, they all realize there aren't many similarities between the mat and the ring.

Professional wrestlers all have great respect for anyone who had the courage to face an opponent on the mat, victorious or not. They never tried to portray professional wrestling as the next step of amateur wrestling. It is totally different; we know it, they know it, and now the fans know it (even the ones who weren't sure). The pros don't look down on the amateurs; they simply acknowledge the fact of the difference between exhibition and competition and enjoy both.

As was the mindset of many amateurs, some of my teammates snickered at my decision to turn pro. Being solid amateurs and national champions, a number of my teammates wanted nothing to do with the professional ranks, and I'm sure I left more than a few of them scratching their heads wondering why their friend, teammate, and the NCAA 191-pound champion was headed to the ring, rather than coaching, teaching, business, or some other more "respectable" profession.

That wasn't the majority of my friends, however. Most of them were 100 percent behind my decision and even came up with some wild ring names for me. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I can't recall any of them, but I do remember they had a great time trying to outdo each other and make sure I started my new career in style.

Whether or not my friends agreed with my decision, it came as no surprise to any who knew me. Whenever I was interviewed on TV,

newspapers, radio, or whatever as my amateur wrestling career progressed, I would invariably be asked what I wanted to do in the future. I would always tell them I wanted to wrestle professionally. It certainly was no secret. Everybody knew what I wanted to do.

Three or four weeks before the season was over, I was contacted by LeRoy McGuirk, a former world junior heavyweight champion, who had wrestled at Oklahoma A&M and promoted professional wrestling in the Oklahoma territory. LeRoy was all business and loved wrestling, both amateur and professional, with a passion. He was born in Broken Bow, Oklahoma in 1912 and was a two-time state champion at Tulsa Central High School, where he wrestled for legendary wrestling coach Art Griffith. He made his way to Oklahoma A&M, where he wrestled for another legend, coach Ed Gallagher. He won the NCAA title in 1931, taking the 155-pound title, and came in second the following year. LeRoy turned pro after graduating and won the world

light-heavyweight title in 1934 by defeating the legendary Hugh Nichols in Tulsa, and a year later, gained the world junior heavyweight championship (which held a 190-pound weight limit at the time).

A tenacious champion, he kept the title for almost eleven years, until a car accident took his sight in 1950. Even though he had to relinquish the title, he kept the promotion going and controlled the junior heavyweight title and division for decades. LeRoy was inducted into the Oklahoma Athletic Hall of Fame in 1977.

McGuirk had heard an interview I did going into the 1965 NCAA tournament and wanted to know if what he heard was true ... that I wanted to turn pro. If I was, he was interested in training me and giving me a start. Trying not to sound too anxious, I told him I was more than interested, and that I was ready to begin. I was through with school and I had a family to support. I needed to earn a living and I wanted to do it in the ring.

A week before the NCAA tournament, LeRoy sent a couple of guys over to watch me work out and to talk to me about life in the ring and on the road. McGuirk wasn't stupid. He had followed amateur wrestling since the days when he himself was on the mat. He used his knowledge and amateur background connections to look for talent to use in his promotion, as well as to feed talent to other promoters across the country ... for a healthy fee, of course.

He wanted to make sure I wouldn't change my mind, or go with another promoter, so he sent someone who could speak my language to talk to me. He sent former two-time AAU national wrestling champion, Tim Woods [George Woodin], along with a couple of other wrestlers who were on their way to a match.

Tim had wrestled for Cornell and Michigan State. He was a Big Ten Conference champion, twice runner-up for the NCAA crown, won the AAU National Title on two occasions, and had

briefly attended Oklahoma State before transferring to Michigan State. He was one of the top amateurs in the country and had just turned pro.

Tim and the boys spent an hour or so with me and told me what to expect when I began my professional career. They didn't have to convince me. I was already convinced, but if I did have any doubts, they were long gone after Tim's visit. Looking back on that afternoon, it still amazes me that LeRoy sent Tim to see me. I would cross paths with Tim again and again across countless rings throughout the world.

Coming off years of wrestling on the mat, I knew the matches in the professional ranks were a "work," although I didn't actually know the actual term at the time. In wrestling jargon, a "work" means the match has a predetermined winner and loser and that the match isn't a real competition. Fans and critics alike would do well to remember that, even though pro wrestling is a work, it doesn't mean the matches aren't mentally

and physically demanding. A work most certainly does not mean the matches are "fake," either. If professional wrestling matches are fake, then you are assuming they are supposed to be a real competition. They are not ... and they haven't been since shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. I am not giving out any shocking trade secrets here. Vince McMahon did that some years ago, only to have wrestling soar to unprecedented heights.

Being an exhibition does not cast a pall over wrestling, either. Muhammad Ali fought dozens of exhibition bouts, as did many of the great heavyweight boxing champions. He would even let his opponent land a few punches and seem to get the better of him to give the paying customer their money's worth. Did anyone consider that bout "fake?" Even though Ali and his opponent's punches were not thrown as they may have been in an actual bout, and Ali acting as if he was jarred by a local boxer that hardly anyone had heard of, did that persuade the crowd that the match was

"fake"? Probably not. Nor did it diminish Ali's reputation and standing as a champion.

Wrestling is one of the most demanding sports there is. At the same time, it is one of the most entertaining. But what sport isn't entertaining? That's the nature of sports, whether it's competition or exhibition entertainment. It all boils down to business.

The business end of wrestling is not all that different from other professional sports. It exists to make a profit. There's isn't anything bad about that. It's just economics. The very first time someone paid to see a sporting event, there was a business aspect added to it, so let's not make more of professional wrestling than what it is.

Professional wrestling is not amateur wresting at a higher level, like the NFL is college football at a higher level, or the NBA is collegiate basketball at a higher level. It never was meant to be. For the amateurs who criticize it for falling short of their

expectations and are disappointed because of it, they are sadly in error. I should know. I have been champion of both.

Before I started my training with McGuirk, I had given some thought to the upcoming Olympic Games in 1968. In the Olympics, the wrestlers compete in freestyle or Greco-Roman, and both are somewhat different than the American collegiate style. I hadn't wrestled much freestyle or Greco-Roman, but I believed I could learn the rules and adapt to the style fairly quickly. My decision was made for me easily enough, though.

The Olympics were another three years hence. I thought about trying out for the 1964 Olympics, but I would have had to miss an entire summer of work and the first semester of my senior year at Oklahoma State. I usually spent my summers working construction and I needed the money I would earn to support my family. With the next Olympics not being held until 1968, I decided to move on and begin earning some

money. However, the money I earned starting out was a far cry from what I expected.

I was thrilled to finally begin the career I had been dreaming about since I was a kid, but in the professional world, that was all I was — a kid. Some of the boys in the Oklahoma territory were in the twilight of their careers by that time. They had been driving up and down the road, night after night, from town to town, from territory to territory, for more years than they would like to have counted, but they weren't ready to wind up their careers just yet. McGuirk offered them a last refuge: little travel, decent payoffs, and low expectations. What they offered LeRoy was security. Since his blindness from the auto accident, he liked to have the boys around him that he had worked with in previous years. He was comfortable having them working for him and he believed he could trust them as much as he could any of the boys.

There was a high cost to pay for running a

promotion that way. LeRoy traded his own comfort for a crumbling territory that continued to suffer because of the old timers hanging on too long and the lack of new talent coming into the area. That was fortunate for me, however. A lot of times, when a new kid breaks into wrestling, they are not greeted with open arms. Wrestlers are independent contractors. They work for the promoters, but they mostly work for themselves. It is important financially and egotistically for them to be placed high up on the card and to hold the regional championship.

When a new guy came in, especially as a babyface, or good guy, the older guys feel like their positions are being threatened and, as a result, make life hard for a rookie. Just the opposite happened to me. The older guys were actually happy to see me. They didn't want to see the promotion close, or their old friend close up shop, so they saw me as a bit of fresh air coming into the old musty auditoriums and dance halls in which they were wrestling.

That being the case, a number of them took me under their wing and literally began to show me the ropes. They knew they had security with LeRoy and weren't afraid of losing their jobs, so I came in way ahead of the game. I had an amateur background, and now I would have the benefit of all those years of acquired ring knowledge from my new found mentors.

LeRoy's promotion covered Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and parts of Texas. The promotion had become so run down that they had only one belt to represent the various state titles LeRoy promoted. They would have to change the name plate on the belt depending on what state they happened to be in on a particular night. One night, it was the Oklahoma heavyweight title. The next night, it was the Louisiana heavyweight title, and so on. It really was bush league. It was a good thing LeRoy didn't promote in any other states. Heaven forbid; he would have had to shell out for more name plates.

Since my eligibility to compete as a collegiate ran out, I was free to begin training professionally. I did know how to wrestle, but what I didn't know could fill volumes. I needed to learn how to work in the ring, how to relax, how to hit the ropes, ring psychology, and a great many other things. I began working out and training on weekends in Tulsa, about two hours from home. There was quite a group of wrestlers in Leroy's stable. Many of the wrestlers I idolized when I was younger were now teaching me the trade — Henry "Treach" Phillips, a veteran from Memphis, "Irish" Mike Clancy, Ike Eakins from Hazard, Kentucky, Danny Hodge, Haystack Calhoun, Dandy Jack Donovan and his wife/manager LaVerne Bottoms (who also was a top lady wrestler at the time). There also was Ron Reed, the Assassins, Antone Leone, and one of my all-time favorites, Sputnik Monroe, among others.

We trained in the Cimmaron Ballroom in Tulsa. It was an old-time opera house with a stage at one end and a balcony at the other. The walls

and the balcony were all decorated like a theatre in New York or Chicago. It was the cultural center of the area. All the wrestling shows were held there, too, until they built the Tulsa Civic Center a few years later. The Cimmaron Ballroom was famous for being where Bob Willis and the Texas Playboys performed. Willis was known as "King of the Texas Swing," which was sort of a big-band sound with guitars and fiddles added. All the country bands played there and their performances were broadcast live from coast to coast.

McGuirk would rent the ballroom, set up the ring on the main floor, and the boys would work with me for a couple of hours before the matches. I would stay after my training sessions to watch the boys work that night, hoping to pick up as many pointers as I could. Besides, I could get in to see wrestling for free. I gladly would have paid to be there.

Making the transition from amateur to pro took some time, but in a few weeks, I was ready for my

first match. There's a great deal of difference between what takes place on an amateur mat and what goes on in the professional ring. As I stated before, amateur wrestling is pure competition, but in the ring, it is an exhibition of sorts.

Anyone entering the ring must keep in mind, first and foremost, that working is how these men and women make their livelihood. It puts food on the table and a roof over their head. Everyone in the ring must be respected for what they do, so not only do you have to work hard in the ring, but you have to protect each other. If your opponent gets injured and is unable to work, you very well may find yourself out of work if you were working a program with him. A program is when two wrestlers work a series of matches with each other over a period of time, usually leading up to a blowoff, or final, match, in most of the towns. So, if your regular opponent gets injured and is unable to wrestle, the chances are you will be out, as well.

I think another reason I got along so well with everyone when I started wrestling professionally is that I had been a fan for so long and I held the wrestlers in the utmost respect. I didn't come in acting like a hotshot national champion. I kept quiet, asked a lot of questions, and learned. I think the veterans respected that kind of an attitude from a new kid.

When I turned pro, everything was still kayfabe. Kayfabe is an old carnival word that means things are kept secret and protected from anyone outside the carnival, or in my case, the wrestling business. Professional wrestling's roots can be found in the traveling carnivals, in a time before it made it to the auditoriums, so a lot of the wrestling terms used were "carny" language.

The pros who trained me in the beginning would show me the moves and various holds, but every time I would ask them questions about the wrestling business, they would "kayfabe" me. Apparently, I was asking questions they

thought I shouldn't be asking. That makes a lot more sense to me now than it did at the time. Why should they give the secrets of the trade to some kid who may wash out and not be around a year from now? And, believe me, there were a lot of amateurs who weren't able to make the transition from the amateurs to the pros.

The main question I wanted an answer to was, who decides who was going to win and who was going to lose. I was coming off a great run as national champion and I had lost only one match since I was a sophomore in high school, so I wasn't ready to lose. "Don't worry about it, kid. You'll learn all about that later," the pros would tell me.

I did find out how that worked before my first match, however, when I was in the dressing room getting ready to go to the ring. LeRoy came in and told me I was to "go over" that night. I wasn't 100 percent certain, but I assumed that meant I was going to win. I was right.

After a couple of weeks of training, LeRoy thought I was ready for my first match. It came on May 15, 1965 in the TV studio of WKY-TV in Oklahoma City. They would broadcast the matches live on Saturday night from seven o'clock to ten o'clock in the evening. The studio was so small that it would only hold about fifteen people in the bleacher seats that were set up on one side of the ring. Huge TV cameras filled the space on the other side. I remember the cameras were so big they wouldn't fit into the back of a pickup truck. By setting up the studio that way, even a small crowd of fifteen would look like a full house. Considering the size of the studio, it was.

My opponent that night was Ronnie Garvin [Roger Barnes], who later became known as the "man with the hands of stone." Ronnie originally was from Montreal, Canada, and came to the States shortly after turning pro in 1962. Wherever he went, promoters immediately gave him a big push, even though he couldn't speak anything but French. He learned English as well as he learned

wrestling and made a name for himself around the world. Ronnie had a great career and topped it off by winning the NWA world heavyweight title from Ric Flair in 1987, but even back in 1965, Ronnie had the reputation of being a talented, and legitimately tough, wrestler.

Ronnie had been wrestling professionally for about three years before I got into the business, and I remembered reading about him in the magazines at the drug store in Blackwell. He had been in the Oklahoma territory for a while, so his run there was just about finished. He was ready to move on.

One thing I have always admired about Ronnie was that he agreed to put me over that night. When a wrestler puts another wrestler "over," it means he makes his opponent look good and gives him the win. Ronnie could have argued with the promoter, refused to do the job [lose the match, and walked out. After all, he didn't have anything to lose. He was leaving the territory, anyway. But he agreed to put over this college kid in his first match on

live television.

The match was set up to be under collegiate or amateur rules to play up on my amateur career and recent national championship. In the hours leading up to the match, I was as nervous as I could imagine anyone could be. Broadcast on television, not only would my family, friends, and teammates see me wrestle, but tens of thousands of people in the state of Oklahoma, as well. It didn't help to know I'd be working with a seasoned pro like Ronnie. I knew he was tough and I was afraid he would kill me in the ring. It wasn't until later that I understood how important it was to wrestle against someone of his caliber because he was able to take me to a good match, in spite of my own lack of knowledge and experience.

When I talked to Ronnie years later, he confided that he was as scared as I was. He didn't see me as a new kid having his first match; what he said he saw was a lean collegiate champion with a crew cut and fire in his eyes. He had never wrestled an

amateur match in his life and thought I would end up killing him. Ronnie must have misinterpreted the fear in my eyes as fire.

One other factor that put me off was the fact that Ronnie had bleached-blond hair. Men with bleached-blond hair was not something I had ever seen in Blackwell, so I was a bit worried about being confined in a 20-by-20 ring with a guy who bleached his hair. There probably wasn't anything about that match I wasn't afraid of.

When the bell rang, I shot in behind Ronnie and took him down. He immediately sat out. When he did, his elbow caught me over my eye and split my eyelid wide open. The first move of my new career and I already was injured and bleeding. That wasn't what I had expected; isn't pro wrestling supposed to be a work? Other than that, the match actually went smoothly, in large part due to Ronnie's expertise. He led me through the match by talking to me and telling me what to do. Ronnie is a great athlete and protected me all

the way. I got the win, a cut over my eye, and $15 for my trouble.

I had finally broken into the glamorous world of professional wrestling, and I couldn't have been happier. LeRoy paid all the boys $15 for TV matches. I could hardly believe I had been paid to wrestle. I didn't get stitches to close the cut Ronnie gave me. I was "allergic" to needles back then and figured taping it up would work just as well. It did.

The next Monday, when I went back to campus in Stillwater for class, a lot of my friends came running up to me to check out my eye and see if the cut was real. I think they were surprised that it was.

I would wrestle Ronnie several times after that, but not until 1972 when I was in Florida. I was sitting in the dressing room and was told I would be wrestling him. Remembering our first match, I sent the referee into the other dressing room to

deliver a message for me. I told the referee, "Tell that son-of-a-bitch Garvin I owe him one." Of course, Ronnie knew what I meant and laughed when he heard it. He told the referee to tell me he said, "I guess he does."

The official didn't know what to think. I believe he thought I was serious. I'm sure he was hoping there wouldn't be any trouble in our match that night. The only trouble I had with Ronnie that night was when I shot in on him to take him down with a double leg. This time, his knee caught me over the other eye and split it open. More blood — and this time, actual stitches — but no more Ronnie Garvin. I enjoyed working with Ronnie. I wish we could have met in the ring more times than we did.

Thanks for helping me out in Oklahoma, Ronnie. A lot of guys would have balked at doing a job for a "green" kid in his first match, but I still owe you two.

Working in a territory that was in decline gave me a lot of breaks I probably wouldn't have had anywhere else. Some of my first big breaks involved my childhood idol, Danny Hodge. I mentioned him earlier, but he did, and still does, so many incredible things. His technique and hand strength is the stuff of legends. He could take an apple in his hands and crush it like anyone else would crush a marshmallow. He was famous for going into hardware stores when he was on the road, finding the aisle where the pliers were displayed, and complaining to the store management that the pliers they were selling were faulty as he broke them with one squeeze of his hand.

There were times when we would be eating together in a restaurant after the matches and some guy would come up to him and say, "Wrestling is fake," or something to that effect. Danny would calmly reply, "Oh, I don't know," and hold his right hand out to shake. When the guy offered him his hand, Danny clamped down so hard you could

hear the bones popping in the poor guy's hand. "Danny ... please let go ... please, Mr. Hodge!" They usually left with Danny's autograph and a somewhat different opinion of the legitimacy of wrestling.

LeRoy booked me with Danny early on. As far as booking went, it was a brilliant move — two former national collegiate champions from Oklahoma, from rival schools, facing each other in the professional ring. The experienced world champion against the young contender made for a great program in the ring. An additional benefit of working with Danny was what I learned by working with him. He was willing to wrestle long matches to teach me how to work 60-minute matches and keep the crowd interested. I learned more from him about that than from anyone. We went to a lot of one-hour draws, which we called broadways, and count-outs.

One night in Tulsa, I attempted to hit him in a flying head scissors, but he ducked and sent me

over the top rope and into the second row of fans at ringside. I was counted out, but I was entitled to a rematch the following week. Danny knew how to keep the fans interested so they came back every week.

Not only did Danny have a reputation as a shooter (someone who can really wrestle), but also as a bit of a heavy-handed opponent. If he was in a match he believed wasn't going well as far as the work his opponent was doing, he would use his strength and amateur skills to stretch them a bit. Stretching an opponent means you purposely inflict pain when you apply a hold or a finisher. The trouble with that is, if you do it too much or too often, the boys won't trust you in the ring and won't want to work with you. To his credit, not to mention my physical well-being, Danny never did that with me. He always took care of me in the ring.

That isn't to say I never got injured in a match with Danny. In fact, it's funny that the only time I do recall getting hurt by him happened to be in a

match when he and I were tag team partners.

I took the first fall in a two-out-of-three-fall match. When I covered my opponent for the three-count, Danny came rushing in to stop the guy's partner from breaking up the fall. After the referee counted the three-count, I started to get up. Danny was still running towards the other side of the ring when I did. He tried to avoid me by jumping over me, but his foot kicked me in the temple and knocked me out cold. Danny may not have been one of the smoothest in the ring, but he certainly was one of the best that has ever, or will ever, grace the ring.

Danny also helped me develop one of my early finishing holds. Every wrestler worth his payoff has to have a finisher. In other words, a signature hold or move that, when used, usually wins the match. I had been using the guillotine to finish most of the matches I won. The guillotine, or crucifix, is like an abdominal stretch, only it takes place with both wrestlers prone on the mat. My

brother, Gerry, used it with great success in the Carolinas. It was a natural for me as it is an amateur hold and you can really stretch someone out when you pin them, but without injuring them. I used it on the high-school and collegiate mats, so it was an easy transition to use in the ring.

Danny and I were working in Fort Smith, Arkansas, in the summer of 1965. He thought I needed more than the guillotine to end my matches. He had made famous a move called the Oklahoma Roll, where he would get his opponent in a sitting position on the mat and get behind him. He would then hook one of his opponent's legs with his leg and the other leg of his opponent with his arm. Once he had it locked in, he would roll across his opponent's back and take him straight to his back for the pin. It was a pretty flashy move in those days. The announcers loved it. "He's setting him up for the Oklahoma Roll! There it is! The Danny Hodge Oklahoma Roll! The winner ... and still world junior heavyweight champion ... Danny Hodge!"

Danny thought it would be a natural for me and I was really honored that he would allow me to use it in the ring. Wrestlers are, understandably, protective of their signature moves. I was still in my street clothes in the dressing room when he offered to demonstrate it for me. We got down on the floor and Danny locked it in. When he turned me over, I split my pants. Danny thought that was hilarious. To this day, he reminds me about it. It has been almost 40 years and he is still laughing. Danny is a great champion and a great friend. For a kid breaking into the business, to be able to work with the likes of Dan Hodge was beyond my wildest dreams.

Chapter 7
The Hard Way

Another wrestler McGuirk booked me with was big Ike Eakins. Ike had been around for what seemed to me like forever. I was such a young kid and he was this "old" guy. I kept thinking, "What is this guy doing in the ring at his age?"

Ike, a native of Harlan, Kentucky, turned pro in 1946 at the age of 30 after returning from World War II, where he served in the tank corps. A legitimate "man's man," Ike died as he lived — to a fatal heart attack on October 20, 1968 after a match.

Older or not, Ike was great to work with. He would guide me every step of the way during those early matches and tell me what to do. He taught me the psychology of the ring and how, after taking a beating, to fire up for a comeback and bring the

crowd to its feet. He always put me over by giving me the pin in the middle of the ring. He also provided hours of entertainment when we traveled together, and he filled my head with stories of the road.

In one particular match we had in some small Oklahoma town, Ike wanted me to do a "blade job" on him. Using a blade was not unusual in the ring. A wrestler would bring in a small razor blade, usually hidden in the athletic tape wrapped around his wrist. During the match, he would take out the blade and run it across his forehead, where the skin is easy to cut and bleeds easily. Combined with the sweat from the match, it doesn't take much to turn your face into a crimson mask and make it look like you are bleeding to death. Fans would go wild at the sight of blood and the promoters would smile all the way to the bank. Blood, in many cases, would keep them coming back week after week.

On that particular night, when Ike tried to take out

his blade, it broke, and there wasn't enough left for him to hold and cut himself. He whispered in my ear, "Hit me. I broke my blade, so we have to do it the hard way."

Getting blood the "hard way" was hitting an opponent with a legitimate punch, in such a way that it results in bleeding. I liked and respected Ike, so I wouldn't do it. I kept throwing working punches, that is, punches that look real and look like they connect, but don't. The more working punches I threw, the madder Ike got. "Hit me, dammit," he demanded. I threw more working punches. Ike was chasing me around the ring, getting angrier with each step he took, and saying he was going to kill me after the match. I just couldn't do it. So, every time I threw a punch, he would lean into it, trying to make it connect and get the blood flowing.

It must have been quite a sight for the fans to see that night. Back in the dressing room Ike was livid. He backed me up against a locker and gave

me an earful. He wouldn't hit me, though. I think he looked at me like I was an adopted son. What he did do, in no uncertain terms and in language that would make the most hardened sailor cover his ears, was tell me I had better not ever ignore what he tells me to do in the ring. I just couldn't hit him, and to this day, I can't understand why anyone would want to cut themselves in the ring. I never did, and I did rather well in my career.

Danny Hodge also figured into the one of the biggest breaks I received in my first year in the ring. Since LeRoy booked the junior heavyweight champion throughout the country — and worldwide, for that matter — and Danny held the belt most of the time, he would only be in the area for a short time before he was defending the title somewhere else.

LeRoy had a program set up for Danny to team up with Haystack Calhoun to work against the Masked Assassins, the top "heel" tag team in the territory. The only problem with that was Danny

had been booked out of the territory, so they had to go with someone who would be in the territory all the time. One of the Assassins went to LeRoy and suggested they use "the kid" to take Danny's spot. That kid, luckily, was me.

What a great turn of events. Not only did I get my first main event program during my first year in the business, but it was a thrill for me to work with guys who had been at the top for years. The Assassins were headliners everywhere they went. Underneath the masks were Tom Renesto and Jody (Joe) Hamilton, two guys who had solid careers before they decided to form a masked tag team. They weren't just the top heel tag team for Leroy. They were the top villains throughout the country. LeRoy brought them into the territory to keep it going when the gates started to drop. They had a good, but short, run with another babyface team, the Kentuckians. The Kentuckians were two big boys from the Bluegrass State (at least, as far as the storyline goes) named Luke Brown and Grizzly Smith. Grizzly's claim to fame extended

into the next generation as his son Jake "The Snake" Roberts continued the family tradition.

When the Kentuckians moved on, Danny was working a program defending his title against Hiro Matsuda [Yasuhiro Kojima] elsewhere, so I moved into the main event. Of course, being in the main event meant I received a bigger payoff. Before the program with the Assassins, I was making about $200 a week and, after the program with them began, I was making around $600 a week. For a 22-year-old kid in 1966, that was a fortune. Even though I had to pay for my own gas, food and hotel while on the road, I was still raking in more money than I had thought possible.

We were selling out everywhere we went. Monday night we were in Tulsa and Tuesday night in Little Rock. Little Rock was about four hours away, so we would spend the night and head up to Springfield for the Wednesday night show. Thursday involved a two-hour drive

to Wichita Falls, Texas, which was a four-to-five-hour round trip. Friday was an easy trip to Oklahoma City and we would be there on Saturday night for the TV taping. We would get Sunday off and start all over again on Monday. Our bodies weren't the only things that took a beating. Our cars did, too. It wasn't unusual to put 150,000 miles on a car each year and to trade it in every twelve months.

Most of the time, I would travel with Haystack in his big International pickup truck. He would have to move the seat all the way back so he had enough room to get behind the steering wheel. You could see smooth marks on the steering wheel where his belly had rubbed against it. He was happy all the time, and laughed and joked constantly. He never took anything too seriously. The fans just loved him, especially the kids. He loved them, too. Haystack would spend hours signing autographs before and after a match, long after everyone else had gone on to the next town.

His given name was William, but like most men named William, everyone called him Bill. He said he was from Morgan's Corner, Arkansas, but actually grew up in McKinney, Texas about 30 miles north of Dallas. Haystack began his ring career in 1955 as Country Boy Calhoun under the tutelage of local promoter, and inaugural NWA world heavyweight champion, Orville Brown.

Haystack stood about six-foot-four and weighed in close to the 600-pound mark. He had a 72-inch chest and a 67-inch waist. His heart, however, was the biggest of all. For a man that big, he was extremely soft spoken, gentle, and kind. Just don't get caught under him in the ring. It was the quickest way to suffocation I knew.

Haystack was famous for entering the ring barefooted, wearing a flannel shirt and overalls. He also would wear a horseshoe on a chain around his neck. Upon entering the ring, he would take it off and hang it around the ring post. It came in handy from time to time when the

heels got a bit too rowdy as he would knock them out with it, much to the delight of the fans.

Promoters would tell tales of his huge appetite and the huge breakfasts he would consume. They would tell a tale of a dozen eggs, pounds of bacon and sausage, two dozen biscuits, and six gallons of milk. That made good press, but in all the time we traveled together, I never saw him eat any more than any of the rest of us. It was part of wrestling lore, but lore is all it was.

Haystack battled diabetes for years due to his size. We lost him to that battle on December 7, 1989. He was 55 years old.

Of course, since I was the new kid, they made me the workhorse of the group. A few weeks into the program, we were working long matches; up to an hour or so. I would work 58 or 59 minutes, take most of the punishment, and then give Haystack the "hot tag." The hot tag is when the wrestler in the ring is being beaten and finally makes a last-ditch

effort to tag his partner. His fresh partner comes in to make the comeback [save] for the team and gets the win. When Haystack came in, he would blow up the house. You would think the roof was coming off the place. Those long matches worked to my benefit, though, because my learning time had been accelerated. I had only five or six workouts before the program with the Assassins, so I had the ultimate on-the-job training.

The Assassins were not only outstanding workers, but wonderful teachers, as well. Like Ike and Danny, they guided me every step of the way during our matches. I was as green as I could be and I had no idea about what I was doing, but they were such great professionals. They were patient and led me through. We traveled to all the towns on the circuit and wrestled each other every night. I learned more during one night in the ring with Tom and Jody than I could have in a month of workouts. I can't even begin to imagine how much more quickly my career advanced by working with Tom and Jody night after night. The fans back then

wouldn't have believed me if I had told them the evil masked Assassins were the good guys after all, but that's the mark of true professionals in our sport. They sold their character to the fans and did everything they could to make the fans hate them. At the same time, they were taking care of a new kid, who hadn't been in the ring for more than a couple of weeks, and making him look good.

After a year in the Oklahoma territory, I was ready to move on. I had never been out of Oklahoma very much when I was growing up, except when I was wrestling in college, and I wanted to see the world. When I went to LeRoy and told him of my plans, I was surprised when he told me he understood. He even said he would even help me hook up with another promoter. So, I packed up and headed to Tennessee, where I witnessed a much different type of wrestling.

Chapter 8
The Heels' Fan Club

I can honestly say I probably had one of the best rookie years any wrestler ever had; working with experienced professionals, getting booked in a main event program, and making top dollar. If things were that good in a territory in decline, I could only imagine what a strong territory could offer. My move to Tennessee, however, would qualify as one of the biggest mistakes of my life, and did more to open my eyes to the business than anything had before or since.

Nick Gulas promoted wrestling in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Alabama. Gulas, along with his partner Roy Welch, had promoted the Tennessee territory since the early 1950s. Gulas was notorious for lousy payoffs and, in my opinion, was the biggest thief in the business. You could fill volumes just listing the guys he

cheated. Almost everybody knew this. Everybody but me, that is.

I drove to Nashville from Tulsa in my old '62 Chevy. When I got there, Gulas had me booked me in a little town somewhere just outside of Nashville. When the matches were over, Nick came in and paid off the boys in cash. When he got to me, he handed me my night's earnings ... $12.50. I sat there with my mouth open, thinking there had to be some mistake.

I had driven more than 400 miles, in an old car with no air-conditioning, in the 90-degree heat, to be handed $12.50 in cash by the biggest crook in the business. "Great career move," I thought. I still can't figure out where the 50-cents came from. I guess it came from old Nick going by some predetermined percentages he had made up years before I started wrestling for him.

What a laugh. If anyone was known in the business for shortchanging the boys, it was

Gulas. In fact, Nick made so many enemies that he had to hire armed guards to watch over his house, 24 hours a day, and place a guard house at the entrance of his driveway.

There wasn't much talent there in those days, either. Most of the crew consisted of veterans who were just hanging on and looking for work. The turnover of talent in the territory was tremendous. With so little pay, nobody could afford to hang around long. Almost from the minute I arrived, I tried to think of a way to get the hell out of Tennessee and back to Oklahoma. I was living in a cheap, dingy hotel, but I couldn't even earn enough money to pay the rent. I was making less than $200 a week, so I went through all the money I had saved from my year with McGuirk in no time.

I also went from national champion and babyface headliner to Gulas' job boy. That was the first time in my career that my job was to lose. Night after night, I had to lay down for guys who could

barely climb into the ring. I was hoping Nick would take advantage of my amateur accomplishments and give me something akin to the same status I had with McGuirk. No such luck. As many of the boys would find out, many times, being a big deal in one territory means nothing in another. Nobody knew me in Gulas's territory, so he wasn't going to put me over his boys.

Another thing that made Gulas' territory so dismal was the towns were spread so far apart. We had to work Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis, and Knoxville, Bowling Green [KY], Birmingham, and countless little towns in-between whose names have been long forgotten. We spent most of our days traveling because the trips were so long. If I was lucky, I could get in a workout in the morning before hitting the road, but that didn't happen often.

One day, when I was traveling from Chattanooga to Nashville, a boulder rolled down the side of one

of the mountains bordering the interstate and broadsided my car. The interstate system was fairly new then and they had cut the roads through the mountains. As a result, some of the rocks were loose, broke off, and rolled down onto the road. Whatever the reasons, my car was in no shape to drive. Now, not only was I not making money, but I had no way to leave Tennessee. I put my car in a small body shop and continued jobbing in the small towns until my car was repaired.

When I finally got my car back, I walked into Gulas' office and told him I was leaving. I let him know in no uncertain terms that I couldn't stay. I told him the money wasn't good, and with what he was paying me, I could barely eat; never mind making a living. Nick just sat there and looked at me. I was sure he was going to show me the door, but what he did surprised the hell out of me. He slowly reached into his pocket and said, "Aw, don't worry about it, kid," and pulled out a roll of $100 bills that would choke a horse. He tossed it onto the table in front of me. "Here, kid. This will

take care of you. Stick with me and you'll have it made."

I stood there looking at what I was sure was more money than I had ever seen in one place at one time in all my life. I picked up the roll and walked out, deciding to give Nick another chance. He really must have needed someone to do jobs [lose matches] because nothing changed. I managed to stick it out for a couple of weeks, but that was all. My car had been repaired and I figured I had enough money to make it home, so I packed up my belongings and headed back to Oklahoma. I was through with Tennessee and Nick Gulas.

I was so glad to be home again. I had wondered why LeRoy had sent me to Tennessee, knowing Nick as well as he did. It didn't take me long to figure out they were constantly trading talent back and forth. It didn't matter whether or not McGuirk liked me or not. Like the rest of the boys, I was just a body to put in the ring. I was learning fast, but even with my new knowledge, there wasn't

anything I could do about it. At least, not yet.

LeRoy wasted no time in putting me back to work. Gerry had just started wrestling as a pro in the summer of 1968 and we teamed up for the first time. Gerry was on spring break from Oklahoma State and decided to stay with me before classes began again. Just as he had in high school, he had made quite a name for himself as an amateur in the college ranks.

McGuirk set up a program teaming me up with Gorgeous George, Jr. against Dandy Jack Donovan and handsome Ronnie Reed, who later had a great career as Buddy Colt. Of course, George wasn't really the son of George Wagner, the original Gorgeous George. He was actually Charles Phelps from Olivia, Minnesota. Like so many of the boys had in the '40s and '50s, he learned to wrestle on the carnival circuit. He later was trained for the pros by "Iron Mike" DiBiase. When the original Gorgeous George passed away in 1963, Phelps took on the gimmick of Gorgeous

George, Jr. and did very well throughout the southwest, Florida, and Canada.

Dandy Jack had been wrestling in the Oklahoma territory since I started wrestling professionally. Originally from Ozark, Alabama, he began his career in wrestling in a most unusual way. In 1956, legendary Atlanta promoter Paul Jones hired him to chauffeur Gorgeous George around the territory and keep him away from the bottle (George had battled alcoholism for years). Not long afterwards, Jack entered the ring himself for a career that would last nearly 40 years. Jack died of a heart attack shortly after his 76th birthday November 27, 2004.

Ronnie Reed turned to the ring for a living after leaving the Marine Corps. A wrestling fan all of his life, Ronnie was trained in Judo and had been a competitive body-builder. A chance meeting with pros Johnny Valentine and Dickie Steinborn in a Washington D.C. gym sparked his interest in the amt game. Ronnie moved to Houston to train with

Joe Mercer, who had wrestled as Otto Von Krupp in Oregon. He learned his new craft well and became a star in every territory in which he wrestled. When he changed his name to Buddy Colt, he won almost every regional title up for grabs. His amazing career was tragically cut short due to a February 1975 plane crash that took the life of the great Bobby Shane.

Ronnie had just arrived in Oklahoma from the Kansas City territory, where he had a great run as the Central States champion. While there, he wrestled world heavyweight champion Lou Thesz and held him to a draw.

Before the program began, George got hurt and was unable to wrestle, which left me without a partner. As a result, LeRoy offered the spot as my partner to Gerry. I wasn't sure he would be interested, but he jumped at the opportunity and, after showing him a few things, we walked to the ring.

Ronnie and Dandy Jack were the ultimate heels. They had slicked-back, bleached-blonde hair and a lady manager, LaVerne Bottoms, who was Jack's wife at the time. Gerry and I thought we hit the big time. Jack and Ronnie had defeated Chati Yokouchi and Chuck Karbo for the United States tag team title, so they were firmly at the top of the ladder, and by working with them, so were we.

The fans that night in Joplin, Missouri witnessed wrestling history as the Brisco Brothers teamed up for the first time, although I'm sure the fans didn't realize that fact.

We all were having a great time. Ronnie, who had wrestled as a babyface up to that time, had always wanted to turn heel, but he had such a successful run as a babyface in Kansas that none of the promoters would let him change. When he met Donovan, Jack told him he was looking for a tag team partner. Ronnie told him he wanted to work heel and accepted his invitation to join him under

McGuirk's banner. He took to it right away and the four of us had a great run against each other.

I had never met Ronnie before we started working together, but I knew, from reading the wrestling magazines, that he was really over [popular] in Kansas. In the years ahead, we would meet time and again in Florida, Georgia, and Texas. Some of my greatest matches were against him and we remain friends to this day.

We had wrestled once in Springfield, Missouri, which was part of the Oklahoma territory. On that particular night, a huge group of fans drove all the way from Kansas, more than 150 miles, to see us wrestle. As we walked to the ring, I couldn't believe what was happening. Instead of cheering for Gerry and me — the good guys — the entire group from Kansas was rooting for Ronnie. It didn't matter that he had bleached blond hair and was wrestling as a heel. They knew him from his babyface days. He was their hero and, no matter how underhanded his tactics were in the ring now,

nothing was going to change their feelings for him. They all sat at ringside in what could best be described as his fan-club section. I had never seen anything like it, but I have to admit I thought it was pretty neat. Gerry and I had the rest of the crowd, but Ronnie had his fan club.

After six months or so in Oklahoma, I was ready to move on again. I wanted to see some different places, get some more experience, and learn from different wrestlers. Once again, LeRoy was understanding and was eager to lend a hand. Where I ended up next, and what happened to me then, made my time in Tennessee seem like the pinnacle of my career.

Chapter 9
Old Man Funk

Dory Funk Sr. promoted wrestling in Amarillo almost since the moment he arrived there in 1949. Originally from Hammond, Indiana, he moved to Texas shortly after leaving the navy at the end of World War II, with the intent to get into wrestling. As the story goes, shortly after he arrived in the Texas panhandle, he met Cal Farley, who had founded the Boy's Ranch on the outskirts of Amarillo ten years earlier. The Boy's Ranch had fallen on hard times. The boys living on the ranch had rebelled and threatened to throw the current superintendent into the nearby Canadian River. With little or no discipline, Cal's dream of providing a home to "boys in need" was in jeopardy.

Upon seeing Funk in the ring, he thought he found the answer to his prayers. He asked him to take

over the superintendent's position and restore order to the struggling home. The first day on the job, Funk took some of the toughest boys to the gym and put them through their paces on the mat. It didn't take long to make his point and order was restored. He agreed to stay there for a period of three months, which stretched into three years. Dory continued to wrestle part-time and decided after his tenure to resume his full-time mat career, which culminated with him taking the world junior heavyweight championship from Angelo Savoldi in his adopted hometown of Amarillo in 1958.

Of course, his greatest claim to fame, other than becoming the wrestling promoter in Amarillo, was probably that he was the patriarch of one of the greatest families the sport has ever seen. He is the proud father of Dory Jr. and Terry Funk.

When I arrived in Amarillo, I had almost two years experience in the ring. Amarillo wasn't much more than a cow town back then, the likes of

which I had seen on TV westerns. My first impression was that there was sand everywhere. It seemed like there was a sandstorm almost every afternoon at five o'clock. It would come in and leave a half inch of sand in hotel lobbies, stores, houses, everywhere. Tennessee had been the pits, but my two runs in Oklahoma were great, so I was feeling pretty good about my future on the mat when I pulled into Texas.

Prior to my arrival, old man Funk showed tapes of my matches on his TV show and was proclaiming everywhere he could about my arrival into the territory. He really played it up in the newspapers, on the radio, and on television, and in the programs he sold at the arenas where he and his boys wrestled. Funk played up my amateur background and the fact that I had won the NCAA national championship. I couldn't believe what a push he gave me, even before I set foot in a Texas ring. However, it didn't take long for me to discover the reason why and to give me a ringside seat to some of the sordid realities of the wrestling

business.

For the first couple of weeks, the old man booked me with his oldest son, Dory Jr. Little did I realize then what importance the Funks would play throughout my career, but that realization would come much later.

Junior learned the wrestling business at his father's knee, as did Terry. Dory started wrestling as a kid at the Boy's Ranch with his father. He earned a spot on the West Texas State University Buffaloes football team as an offensive and defensive tackle. Incidentally, to my knowledge, West Texas State has spawned more professional wrestlers than any other college. Not only are Dory and Terry counted as alumni, but so are Tully Blanchard, Stan Hansen, Bruiser Brody, Bobby Duncum, Ted DiBiase, and Barry Windham, among others. Junior's senior year also saw him play in the Sun Bowl when the Buffaloes defeated Ohio University.

After graduating from West Texas State, Junior moved right into the ring and learned from the likes of Pat O'Connor, Gene Kiniski, Verne Gagne, and Sonny Myers. They were great wrestlers and most certainly some of the finest tutors available. Schooled as he was in professional wrestling, Dory was not that strong as an amateur ... and that's where I came into the picture. As I stated before, Dory Sr. put on quite a publicity campaign on my behalf. You would think he was promoting world champion Lou Thesz, not some kid who was pretty much unknown outside of the amateur ranks and the rings of the Oklahoma territory.

With such a build-up, it was natural for everyone to have the highest expectations of me. The old man was no exception, but his expectations came from a different direction. In our first few matches working together, his father had me lose to Dory in about two minutes. Night after night, we faced each other, and night after night, he would pin me in two minutes to demonstrate what a great amateur

wrestler he was. Thanks to Dory Sr., there wasn't a wrestling fan in West Texas who didn't know of my amateur accomplishments. And now, thanks to him, there wasn't a fan paying the price of admission, or turning on their television set, who didn't think his son was better.

Senior not only gave Junior a leg up in his professional career, but made him an amateur champion, all without Dory ever stepping on the amateur mat. The only purpose the old man had for me was as an example to show everyone what a great amateur Junior was. He gave me a huge build-up going in, only to put Junior over as being better than me. I was an NCAA amateur champion — and Junior, to my knowledge, had never wrestled amateur in his life.

Senior made sure I was well compensated for taking care of his boys. He paid me the healthy sum of $25 a night. It made Gulas seem like the most generous man in the world. After a few weeks of jobbing to Junior every night, it was

Terry's turn. After all, Junior and I had gone around the territory, and everyone knew I was "no match" for him.

That was one of the only times in my career when I seriously thought about quitting wrestling. Tennessee had been bad, but all I wanted to do was get out of the state, not the sport. I had only a few hours left to get my college degree. The more I thought about it, the better it seemed to me. I was ready to go home, dust off the history books, finish my degree, and begin to look for a different career.

Terry was about three years younger than Junior and got into wrestling about the time I did. He also had attended West Texas State University and was eager to follow in his dad's and brother's footsteps in the family business. He was totally different from his brother. Junior was quiet and pretty much kept to himself, and through the years and in the hundreds of matches we had, I never really got to know him all that well. He was smooth and

methodical in the ring, even during his early days.

Terry showed another side of the Funk family. He had such an outgoing personality. He was full of life and he seemed determined to live every minute of it to the hilt. His style in the ring was more like his old man; scientific wrestling mixed with as much brawling as he could get away with. Most nights, it seemed like he did much more brawling than wrestling, and in West Texas rings, that was quite a bit. It served him well because the fans loved it.

I liked both the Funk boys, especially Terry. This may sound strange, but in the ring, it was just business. Their dad was the boss and we all had to work in the ring as he directed, no matter what we thought, but Junior and Terry were probably happier about the outcome of the matches than I was.

Terry and I worked together for the next couple of weeks with the same result. Terry was beating me

the same as his brother, in two minutes or less. I had never been pinned in my life and now I was being butchered by the youngest of the Funk clan, who didn't know what he was doing as far as amateur wrestling was concerned. Once again, Senior accomplished what he had set out to do. He showed the fans of West Texas wrestling that Terry was as good as his older brother, and that the young punk Brisco was no match for either of them.

Terry had another record that none of the boys wanted to top, or even tie. He is the only wrestler I know of who crashed two cars in one day. We were booked to wrestle in San Angelo, which was about a four-to-five-hour drive from Amarillo. Terry wanted me to ride with him, but he was running late as usual, so I decided to ride with one of the other boys. Terry lived in Canyon, just outside of Amarillo, and having gotten a late start, he took off like a bat out of hell to make the show on time. He hadn't driven more than a few miles down the road when he drove off the road

and nearly totaled his car. Not missing a beat, Terry ran home and called his father-in-law. He talked him into letting him borrow his car for the trip and arrived at the arena in just enough time to walk to the ring.

San Angelo wasn't one of my favorite towns. It was such a long trip from Amarillo, and with matches not ending until eleven o'clock at night or later, it always was three or four o'clock in the morning before we got back home. After the matches on that particular night, Terry asked me if I would ride back to Amarillo with him and help keep him awake. I agreed and we headed out from the arena to his borrowed car. San Angelo was located in a dry county, and that meant we couldn't buy beer. Terry turned to me and said, "Hey, Jack. I know a little store in the next county that stays open all night. We can pick up some beer there."

I was all for that, so I said, "Sounds great. Let's go."

No sooner had we turned the corner of the auditorium towards the car when Terry's old man stepped out and told us, "I want you boys to get straight back to Amarillo. Don't stop for beer." Terry knew exactly how to reply to his dad. "Sure, Dad. Jack and I will head straight back. Don't worry." Twenty minutes later, we were loading a case of beer in the car.

The back roads of Texas in the small hours of the morning are about as deserted as they could get, which usually lent itself to wrestlers trying to turn their cars, or in this case, their father-in-law's car, into guided missiles along the narrow roads that tied the countless small towns together in the mid-'60s. We drove for a couple of hours and shared the case of beer. As the miles flew by, Terry's foot became heavier on the accelerator, until we were going about 70 miles an hour. I had just about dozed off when we came to a T-intersection in the road. I guess the combination of speed, darkness, beer, and fatigue helped Terry miss the turn. We went airborne at 70 miles an

hour for about 25 yards.

I woke up when we were in the air and had enough wits about me to turn my back to the dashboard. When we hit the ground, the car literarily fell apart. It was like the scene in the movie, National Lampoon's Vacation, when Chevy Chase launched his car over the bluff in the desert. The car landed flat, as if someone had dropped it from a 10-story building. We connected to the ground with such force that all four wheels popped off the chassis and all the doors flew open. My position in the car helped as I got out with only a few bruises.

As I crawled out the passenger side, I heard Terry screaming, "Oh, God. Oh God. Oh, my God." From the way he was crying, I thought he was hurt badly, so I ran around to the other side of the car. As I rounded the front fender, I saw him standing about ten feet away, looking at his father-in-law's car ... or what was left of it. "Terry! Terry! Are you all right?" I yelled at

the top my lungs so he could hear me over his own anguished screams.

"Jack! Oh, God. Look at this car. My father is going to kill me!" Terry wasn't worried about me, or the car he had borrowed from his wife's father. All he could think about was what his father was going to do to him. That was Terry, and knowing his dad, I couldn't blame him. If Dory Funk Sr. was anything, he was tough, and he demanded that his boys do what he asked. Terry had not only wrecked another car, but he disobeyed his father. He was in for it, and he knew it. Not only that, but we had to hike five miles to the nearest gas station so we could call his wife and have her come get us.

If Terry wasn't worried about my well-being, his old man certainly was. After the accident, he was a little bit nicer to me, and he and some of his lieutenants followed me around for days to make sure I was okay. I think they were worried about me suing them. His concern didn't extend to the

ring, however. I was still getting beat in record time by everyone Senior had me face. So much for Dory Senior's concern. Beyond that, Senior barely spoke to me.

Before I left the Amarillo territory, Senior did one more thing to help damage my career, not to mention what was left of my ego. After weeks of doing squash jobs for his boys and anyone else he put in the ring with me, he booked me as a referee. I wanted to be a wrestler, not a referee, so I asked him why he had taken me out of the ring. I told him I had no intention of being in the ring as an official. True to his style, he told me, "Kid, it will be good for you. Besides, I have a lot of guys here who need matches. I'm just trying to help you out and give you some experience." I thanked him, but told him that wasn't the type of experience I needed. I hung around a couple more weeks, got back into my car, and headed back to Oklahoma.

I never did confront the old man about the way he

treated me. The reason was evident, and I figured it wouldn't do any good, anyway. I have always tried to look beyond any unkindness directed at me. When it was all said and done, I was just glad to get out of Amarillo. Our paths would cross again and again, with Senior doing everything in his power to keep me from winning the world heavyweight championship.

Chapter 10
Dressing Room Politics

When I arrived back in Oklahoma, it didn't take me long to feel a little better about continuing my pro career. LeRoy met with me and encouraged me to not give up. He told me to give it a little more time and explained that all territories weren't run like Amarillo. I decided to stick it out for a while longer. After all, how much worse could things get? If things didn't change, I could always go into teaching.

That time, I stayed in Oklahoma for a solid year. The territory continued its freefall and I thought I had done about all I could in the area. After a few months, LeRoy booked me back in Texas, but this time, to a different part of the state and a different promoter.

The Dallas territory was run by a former Southern

Methodist University football star, Jack Adkisson. Jack stood about six-foot-four and weighed close to 270 pounds. He also had played for the old American Football League's Dallas Texans in the early '50s. A native of Dallas, the biggest part of Jack's fame came from a different sport, and under a different and more notorious name. After injuries cut his football career short, he entered the ring under the name of Fritz Von Erich. Interestingly enough, both the first and last name of his wrestling persona came from family names as Erich was his mother's maiden name.

In the early '50s, World War II was still fresh in the minds of most Americans, and Fritz took advantage of it by creating a German character. That made him a very rich man. As one of the most hated heels of all time, Jack took Fritz to the top card everywhere he appeared and upended Verne Gagne for the American Wrestling Association's world heavyweight championship for a month. Sporting a crewcut, the goose-stepping master of the iron claw won the National

Wrestling Alliance American title in Texas by defeating Brute Bernard on June 6, 1966. After the match, a near riot broke out. Having a "Nazi" as world champion was one thing, but an emissary of the Fuehrer holding the coveted American title was unthinkable.

I wonder how amazed the fans, who cheered for his demise in the ring, would be if they knew that lumbering German had almost accepted a music scholarship to the University of Texas at Austin to play the clarinet. Like him or not, he was a promotional mastermind.

Von Erich was just as well-known for being the patriarch of one of wrestling's most well-known family dynasties. Fortunately for me, his boys hadn't yet started wrestling. If they had, I may have been doing two-minute jobs for them, as well. He did great interviews and, if anyone knew Jack Adkisson, they lost him in the persona of Fritz Von Erich. Fritz had taken the territory from Morris Sigel, who had promoted Texas since the

1930s. The territory was based out of Dallas and covered the towns of San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Houston, and spot shows throughout the state.

When I got there, he booked me in opening matches. I wrestled some of the more established stars in the area, like Billy "Red" Lyons, Buddy Austin, Brute Bernard, and "Killer" Karl Kox. Fritz seemed to like me, though, and decided to give me a push. He moved me to the mid-card, and then to the semi-final matches. I was making about $300 a week and things finally seemed to be looking up for me. I thought I had made the right decision about continuing with professional wrestling, after all. Much to my surprise, after a couple of months, Fritz called me into his office and talked about putting me on top and giving me the Texas heavyweight title. He thought a young babyface as champion would be good for business. Fritz may have thought so, but not everyone agreed with his plan. When word got out about his intentions, some of the older guys went to Fritz and tried to convince him to push one of their

own, instead. Dallas was a big Mexican town. By that, I mean there was a fairly-large Mexican population, and a great number of them were hardcore wrestling fans. Wrestlers like Mil Mascaras, El Santo, and Omar Atlas drew well throughout the Dallas territory.

They tried to convince Fritz to hold off on my push and consider Omar Atlas [Omar Mijares], who was wrestling in Texas at the time as Buddy Moreno. Omar came to Texas by way of the South American rings. Originally from Venezuela, Omar represented his home country on the mat in the 1958 Central American/Caribbean Games. He turned pro shortly thereafter in Spain and, in 1962, arrived in the U.S. through an invitation by Ciclon Negro to wrestle for Morris Sigel.

I liked Omar, but I always thought of him as a journeyman, a ham-and-egger, than a main-event performer. Then again, I was the new kid in the territory. I had no political capital on which I could call or any proven drawing power in the

territory, so I had to continue working hard in the ring and hope for the best.

To help him decide on who would get the belt, Fritz booked Omar and me to do a "babyface" match on TV in Fort Worth. Omar and I talked before entering the ring and we agreed that I would run the match. Running the match means I called the moves and set the tempo. Since I was calling the match, I gave Omar most of the best moves and high spots. The two of us did one hell of a job. It was one of the best matches they had on TV in Fort Worth for some time.

Unfortunately, my generosity was my undoing. The match ended in a draw, but I had made Omar look so good by giving him most of the match that Fritz decided to put the strap on him. I don't know who said "no good deed goes unpunished," but that certainly applies here. I thought that was all there was to the reasoning behind Fritz's decision, but years later, while I was in Australia, Killer Karl Kox [Herb Gerwig]

informed me that one of the boys, Billy "Red" Lyons, had more to do with persuading Fritz than our performance in the ring. Kox said "Billy Red" went to Fritz and told him he didn't think I was all that good in the ring, and more than likely, would likely wash out before I drew any real money. Why should he [Fritz] waste time and squander the resources the Texas title brings on a guy who wouldn't make it in the sport?

Whatever else was said that day didn't matter. I guess a lot of the older guys were somewhat nervous about having a young, fairly new guy at the top, as well. Lyons convinced Fritz and Buddy Austin dropped the title to Omar on August 9, 1967 in Corpus Christi.

It always amazed me that, even though wrestlers work together to protect each other from injury between the ropes, that courtesy doesn't always extend beyond them. It is an unusual business in that manner. We all worked for promoters, but the fact remained that we also were independent

contractors. If we didn't watch over our own affairs, it was a sure bet the promoter wasn't going to do it for us. Everyone wants the push to move up the card and, consequently, earn more money, and usually, the higher up on the card you wrestled, the bigger the payoff. Another problem was the setup of management and labor fostered a lot of jealousy and contention in the locker room. You not only had to watch out for yourself in the ring, but you had to watch your back outside of it.

Lyons taught me a valuable lesson, but I would gain a measure of satisfaction over him years later when I won the world title in Houston — but more on that later on.

Looking back, I really don't blame the older guys; they were just protecting themselves and one of their own. It was part of the kayfabe way of doing business during the time. You can't find too much fault in that, but it still bothered me that Billy Red orchestrated it in the manner he did.

Texas was good for me, though. Every time I went to a new territory, I tried to learn as much as I could from the veterans who were there at the time. I hit the jackpot when I wrestled for Fritz because I met some of the best workers in the business. Two of them, in particular, would have the greatest effect on my career to date. I truly believe, if it hadn't been for Killer Karl Kox and Joe Scarpa, my career never would have reached the level it did.

Killer Karl Kox was, most likely, the best heel I had ever seen. If you want to know how Killer worked in the ring, just take a look at Stone Cold Steve Austin. The attitude, the movements in the ring — watching Steve work was like traveling back to my early days in Texas.

Kox was from Baltimore, Maryland, one of sixteen children born to a pressman from the Baltimore Sun and his wife. During his freshman year in high school, he was suspended for fighting and, instead of returning to school after the

suspension, he talked his father into signing the papers that would allow him to enlist in the Marines. He began wrestling in 1956 and, within a few years, was brought into the Detroit territory, where he quickly became a top card. We hit it off right away, and he took me under his wing, as the boys in Oklahoma did when I first started.

Joe Scarpa was another wrestler who took me in. Jay and I are close friends to this day. Joe began wrestling in the mid ‘50s as "Joltin Joe" Scarpa. The son of a construction worker and a homemaker, he originally was from Philadelphia, but grew up in New Jersey. Joe was a solid hand in the ring and had tremendous matches against every top name in the sport, including holding both Lou Thesz and Dory Funk Jr. to a stalemate during their tenure with the world belt. Of course, he made a bigger name for himself many years later as Chief Jay Strongbow in the WWWF [now the WWE].

Mike Paidousis, who got into wrestling after a

stellar football career at the University of Tennessee, probably was the nicest man I had ever met. He kept me laughing from the moment I met him. Personality-plus is the only way I know to describe Mike. I don't know of anyone who didn't love him. He passed away on September 9, 2002 at the age of 78. We had lost touch through the years, but news of his death saddened me as if I had just seen him yesterday.

Even though he gave the push to Omar Atlas, I have my suspicions that he really liked me. Fritz knew the business inside and out and he thought a fresh babyface would bring in the crowds. I think my amateur background helped out quite a bit. Fritz was an athlete first and foremost, and he understood and respected what other collegiate athletes put themselves through to gain whatever degree of success they had achieved.

During Omar's tenure as Texas champion, the crowds fell off. He wasn't able to get over as well as Fritz had hoped and his friends had

planned. A few weeks after winning the title, Omar found himself as the ex-champion when he was injured. If Fritz was an athlete first, his business acumen ran a close second. All it took was a cursory glance at his financial books to realize a new champion was needed. He realized he had made a mistake and was willing to make the necessary changes to correct it. That time, however, he didn't take a consensus. He made the decision himself.

"Killer" Buddy Austin was from Lovejoy, Georgia. He stood about six-foot-two, tipped the scales around 240, and was as tough as they came. For those of you who never had the pleasure of seeing Buddy in action, he was a lot like Harley Race in the ring, and there was a good reason for that. Buddy was one of the guys who trained Harley when he first broke into the business. Buddy was a star of the first degree, and had been since he turned pro in 1956, especially in Florida, the Central States, Japan, and Los Angeles, where he won the WWA version of the

world heavyweight title on three occasions by defeating Pedro Morales, Bobo Brazil, and "Iron Mike" DiBiase, respectively.

When Omar Atlas was injured, the Texas heavyweight title was declared vacant and reinstated with a one-night tournament in San Antonio. Buddy Austin walked away as the new champion by defeating Duke Keomuka [Hisao Tanaka] in the final. When he retired from the ring, Buddy became a minister, and died far too young at the age of 49 from a heart attack in 1981.

To be a successful wrestling promoter, you always have to be thinking of what comes next in the story — not only who the next champion is going to be, but the one after that and, hopefully, the one after that. Keeping the fans interested and guessing what is going to happen is the key. Fritz's plan was to give Buddy a run with the title and put me into a position as challenger.

Buddy and I had a great program together. We

had worked together quite a bit in Oklahoma and for the Funks in Amarillo, so we knew each other in the ring. After booking us in Dallas, Fritz began to feature us in the other towns.

Buddy was nearing the end of his career when we met for the recognition of being the Texas heavyweight champion. I'm not ashamed to say I was more than a bit intimidated when I faced Buddy for his belt. I had, of course, worked with Buddy in tag team matches in Oklahoma, but facing him in a singles match for my first championship was different. I was nervous when I entered the ring that night in Dallas and, I have to admit, somewhat scared. My mind raced back to all the magazine articles I read as a kid and I was as afraid of his reputation as I was of him. I had read about Buddy in all the wrestling magazines back at the drugstore in Blackwell. I had been a big fan, and now I was in the ring with him for the Texas title.

I worked pretty stiff for the first five or ten

minutes of the match, but I got over that as the match went on. I knew if I was to be anything more than a journeyman, I had to get over the stage fright and learn to look at my opponent as an ordinary mortal, rather than the superstar I looked at him as. To get me back on track in that match, I did what I usually did, which was what came most naturally to me — amateur moves. I enjoyed tag teams, but single [one-on-one] wrestling was what I wanted to do. The fans loved it, too.

One of the things I liked most about wrestling in matches other than curtain-jerkers was the opportunity it afforded me to do interviews on TV. As important as it is to know how to wrestle, in the world of professional wrestling, if you were not good on the "stick" (that is, the ability to do interviews that promote yourself, your opponent, and upcoming matches), or microphone, you might as well be comatose in the ring because the few fans you draw will be. The main goal of a main event wrestler is to sell tickets, and television was the way to do it. If you can't bring in the fans who

want to see you win — or in case of a heel, want to see you lose — you won't be featured for long. I was given a lot of time on TV and I was able to hone my skills in front of the camera, which was an invaluable asset, especially so early in my career.

Another thing Scarpa, Austin, and Kox did to help give my career the push had nothing to do with what happened in the ring. What they did that was so important was they left Texas. They had such a good run, they were noticed by promoters all over the world, and those promoters began to call them. Karl left for Australia and gave me his phone number. He told me when I was through in Texas to give him a call and he would get me some matches "Down Under." Joe headed for the Florida territory, which was based out of Tampa and run by Eddie Graham. Joe also gave me his phone number and told me to call him when I was ready to leave Texas and move on to another territory.

When I finished my run for Fritz, I thought Australia sounded like a good career move, so I packed my gear once again.

I was looking for some new experience and, for the first time in my life, the possibility of getting out of the country. Duke Keomuka had been working some shots in Texas from time to time with Bull Curry. Duke told me when I was finished working for Fritz, to give him a call, and he would set me up in Japan. When I finished my obligation to Fritz, I was free to go, so I called Duke. At the beginning of November 1967, I headed across the Pacific Ocean to the Land of the Rising Sun.

Chapter 11
Fish-Head Soup

When Duke Keomuka asked me if I would be interested in a six-week tour of Japan, I probably could have flown there without a plane. I had never been out of the country before and I was really excited about seeing the world, not to mention facing competition from another country.

I liked Duke from the moment we met in Texas. Of course, he was one of the wrestlers I had been in awe of growing up, once again, having read about him in the wrestling magazines. He used his Japanese gimmick to become one of the most hated heels of his era, but in real life, he was a delightfully kind man. Like Fritz and others who took on a German "Nazi" and Japanese personas, Duke raised the patriotic ire of the fans across the country as they all remembered too well the war in the Pacific and Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese heels were like German heels — arrogant and brutal — but the Japanese were brutal in a different way. They were conniving and devious in the ring. They used "oriental" holds and moves on their opponents, like illegal karate thrusts, when the referee was looking the other way. It was hard to tell which of the "foreign" villains were more hated — the Germans or the Japanese — but there were countless times when they were fortunate to escape with their lives after disposing of their American opponents. Riots were all too common at the end of their matches, but business was good when they were in town.

Duke was born in Maui, but grew up in California. His real name was Hisao Tanaka, but everyone knew him as Martin, or just Duke. Duke and his family were interned, as were more than 110,000 other Japanese Americans solely because of their Japanese bloodline. He never talked about the camp at Manzanar, or how long he had been there as a young man, but he never seemed bitter about it. I can't imagine how he wouldn't have

been, but he never spoke of it, so I assumed he had put it in the past.

Shortly after the war, he turned pro and became a huge star almost from the beginning, winning both singles and tag-team titles in Hawaii, the Carolinas, Texas, and Florida. His most memorable runs were with partners Mr. Moto, Tokyo Joe, and the incomparable Hiro Matsuda. He also held the Texas heavyweight title on five occasions. He was a tremendous man and a great wrestler who always looked out for others.

When I went to Japan, one of the promoters there was Shohei Baba, who was known as the "Giant of the Orient," and for good reason. At seven-foot-three, Baba towered over most of the other wrestlers. Not only was he tall, but he was thin and gangly, weighing only about 210 pounds. Wrestling Baba was like wrestling a giant spider.

Baba was only a few years older than I was, but

our road to the ring came from two different directions. I was an amateur wrestler, while Baba's background was on the baseball diamond. His career began as a pitcher for the Tokyo Giants, Japan's premiere major league baseball team, at the age of sixteen. Signed immediately after graduating Sanyo High School, he was known as much for his stature as he was his fastball. In fact, he was the tallest player ever to step on the mound in Japan. His major league career was cut short after only three games, though, and he was sent to the minors to gain more experience. However, disaster struck before his first game in the minors. He slipped in his bathtub and fell, injuring the nerves in his pitching arm.

With baseball out of his future, he turned his sights to wrestling. Entering the sport, Baba sought out the national idol, Rikidôzan [Mitsuhiro Momota], the owner of the Japanese Wrestling Association. His timing couldn't have been better since Rikidôzan's ring career was heading for its final years, and he was looking for a new superstar

to take his throne when he was finished. Baba was just the man to do it. After training with Rikidôzan and spending three years traveling the territories in America, he returned to Japan in time to save the struggling Japanese Wrestling Association. Shortly after his return, Rikidôzan was stabbed in the night club he owned and, refusing to seek medical help, died shortly thereafter on December 8, 1963, at the age of 39.

The stage was set for Baba to not only return to his homeland, but to ascend to the throne he believed Rikidôzan was keeping warm for him. The Japanese Wrestling Association continued to have financial troubles and, under the helm of new ownership, set course towards almost certain destruction. With the help of the Funks, Baba left the old promotion and founded All Japan Pro Wrestling. Baba took the sport in a different direction when he, through the Funks, brought American wrestlers to Japan and presented an American-style of performance to capacity crowds. That was one of the main reasons Dory

Funk Sr. was able to entice good talent into his territory to feed to his sons. He would promise to book them two or three times a year in Japan for a good payday.

Even in the world of professional wrestling, the wrestlers who had an amateur background received more respect from their peers. Baba was no different; he had never been on the mat, but having put in time playing amateur baseball, he appreciated the effort and sacrifice it took to wrestle. He treated me well. I was booked at the mid-card level and had several matches with his top star, Antonio Inoki.

Inoki came from a large, prominent family from Yokohama. Studying martial arts from an early age, he also excelled in basketball and track and field in the discus, shot put, and the javelin. Feeling the post-war economy in Japan, Inoki, along with his mother and brothers, immigrated to Brazil to live with his grandparents. Returning to Japan three years later,

he was introduced to the wrestling legend Rikidôzan, who agreed to train him, Baba, and a handful of aspiring wrestlers. He worked with Baba for a number of years before creating his own promotion, New Japan Pro Wrestling, in 1971. Inoki was sharp. It didn't take him long to realize there was more money to be made by running your own promotion, rather than working for someone else, so he broke away and started his own promotion. Inoki later gained quite a measure of fame as a politician in Japan, being elected to the level of a U.S. senator, and for taking part in a historic wrestler-versus-boxer match on June 25, 1976, with then-heavyweight-boxing-champion Muhammad Ali.

Inoki was easy to work with and knew a lot about the American style of wrestling due to the time he spent in the United States working with Hiro Matsuda. In fact, the first time I wrestled Inoki was on Nashville TV in 1996. I was teamed with Tarzan Baxter [Leon Baxter] and we wrestled Inoki and Matsuda. Inoki and I had solid,

entertaining matches that would go 30 to 45 minutes. One particular 30-minute broadway we had was named the best match in Japanese wrestling history. Nearly 20 years later, they were still airing our match on Japanese television.

I wrestled many times for Baba, who ran the NWA promotion in Japan, when I was champion. Inoki aligned himself with the World Wrestling Federation and brought Vince McMahon's talent over to Japan. For a short time, he held the WWF's version of the world title by beating Bob Backlund. After I dropped the NWA world title, I wrestled for Antonio and became the first [former] NWA champion to work for him. He ran a great promotion and paid well. I received $5,000 a week plus expenses. Not bad for an ex-champion from Blackwell, Oklahoma.

Japan was a strange experience for me. We were based out of Tokyo and I never saw so many people in one place in all my life. With a population of nearly three million people, Tokyo

was bigger than New York City at the time. The streets were ten to twelve lanes wide and the sidewalks were wider than the roads I grew up riding on back in Oklahoma. I learned quickly that you had to keep moving when you were walking down the sidewalk or you would get run over by the crowd. Baba took care of us. He would send some of his boys with us to make sure we were safe, didn't get lost, or do something by mistake that might offend our hosts.

The Japanese fans were very different from the fans I had wrestled before in the States or in Australia. They didn't scream or holler at the wrestlers, and they came dressed like they were going to church. They would sit very properly in their seats and would applaud politely when they approved of a move in the ring. It was quite a contrast from arenas we wrestled in back home where fans would hang from the rafters. In Japan, the crowd seemed better suited for the theater.

The culture took some getting used to and six

weeks was not enough time to assimilate much. In the smaller towns we worked, we had to sleep on straw mats on the floor, and the walls in the hotels were made of paper. We were there in the winter and there was no heat. The bathroom had no toilet; only a hole in the floor. Remember, this was the mid to late '60s. Things were a lot better when I returned a few years later. It was difficult to wrestle after a night of sleeping on the floor and not having any heat to assist in warming up before a match. We made the best of it, but no one complained too much. What I missed the most about the States was the food. What I wouldn't have paid for a steak or a Sonic hamburger. Raw fish and fish-head soup didn't appeal to me at all. I still won't eat sushi. I did eat a lot of spaghetti, but that was about all. It doesn't take long to get tired of spaghetti every night, but it was a hell of a lot better than the alternative.

It would have been great to do some sightseeing while I was there, but most of what I saw of the Japanese countryside was through the window of a

train. The tour schedule didn't allow us much time to do anything other than travel and wrestle. By the time the matches ended and we arrived back at our hotel, it would be one o'clock in the morning. Between the time difference, and the lack of food and sleep, we would be exhausted. By seven o'clock the next morning, we would be on a train heading for the next town.

Occasionally, we would have a day off, which most of us dreaded. We didn't know the language, customs, or culture, so we didn't have much to do. We usually would arrive in a town about noon, check into our hotel, and just walk around visiting shops or department stores. So much for the glamorous world of a professional wrestler. There was one bright spot in the experience for me, however. I got to meet the father of my former teammate at Oklahoma State, the great Yojiro Uetake. It was nice to have a little remembrance of home so far away from Stillwater.

The American wrestlers on the tour included

Victor Rivera, George "The Animal" Steele, Nick Kozak, and Sputnik Monroe. We didn't get to wrestle each other, though. We were there to face Baba's boys. Baba knew the best way to turn a dollar in Japan was to pit Japanese wrestlers against the Americans. As in the United States, the people remembered the war, only now, the tables were turned. The Americans were the bad guys and the Japanese were the heroes.

The funny thing about the way Japanese wrestlers acted in the ring when they faced us. Many of them liked to shoot on the American boys to see just how tough they were. That was especially true with some of the young guys who were just starting out. I enjoyed shooting with them and some of them were pretty rugged. The more seasoned pros didn't try to go at us. They understood the business aspect of what we were doing. They knew if either they or their opponents were injured, they might be on the sidelines, and that meant going without a pay check.

Chapter 12
Motel-Room Title Match

Leaving Japan, I had only one thought in mind, and that was to get home to see Karen and the kids. I was losing touch at home, being gone all the time, and it was taking its toll on our marriage. I wanted to keep things together and I thought some time at home might help. I was so happy to see Karen, my children, mom, Gerry, and my sisters. I had three children by then, a second daughter, Jennifer, and son, Barry.

It was obvious Karen and I weren't going to make it. As hard as we tried to stay together for our children, and for ourselves, it just wasn't working. Wrestling on the road and marriage make a difficult combination at best. Too many miles and too many towns make any semblance of a

normal family life all but impossible. We weren't ready to throw in the towel just yet, but I kept wondering how much longer we could keep it up.

The Oklahoma territory was barely limping along. It was at the lowest level it had ever been as far as talent and the crowds were concerned. After a week or two, I knew I had to look for greener pastures. I wasn't making any money and I had a family to support.

I remembered "Killer" Karl Kox telling me to give him a call when I finished my run in Texas and he'd get me booked in Australia. Having been out of the country only once in my life, I thought that might be an opportunity I may not see again. So, I pulled out the number Killer had given me, called the booking office, boarded a plane, and set out for Australia in the fall of 1968.

The night before I left for the Land Down Under, I didn't sleep well. I was filled with excitement and apprehension at the same time. I was excited about

wrestling in a new territory and in what I perceived as a new adventure. What disturbed me was I had never flown all that much. Every territory in which I had found myself in, other than my recent trip to Japan, I arrived in my '62 Chevy, not on a 747. I went with more excitement than fear because I had a proven track record in several territories.

Kox was there, so I had at least one friend who had already admitted he thought I had what it took to make it in the business, and who helped me land a great deal with Fritz. Knowing that, I thought I would be okay. Time would tell.

Jim Barnett was the man who promoted wrestling there. He was an unforgettable figure, as much as anyone I had ever met. Originally from Oklahoma City, Barnett was a flamboyant dresser who always wore three-piece suits and horn-rimmed glasses. He tried to portray someone who came from "old money." I have no idea if he did or not, but I do believe it was more of an act than

reality. Jim looked like a character out of a Noel Coward play. He would come up to me and say, "Jack, my boy. How are you today?" When he had all the wrestlers together, he would say, "When I look at my boys, I see stars." He was quite a character.

The background told about him was that he had gone to Harvard, where he majored in journalism. While there, he became friends with the local wrestling promoter and began writing a weekly program to be sold at the matches. From there, he went to Louisville and began promoting on his own.

One thing that set Barnett apart from hundreds of other promoters was in the way he ran his territories. Most of the promoters thought of themselves first and the boys second. Normally, when you worked a territory, you paid your own way; food, gas, hotels, and any other expenses incurred along the way. Jim gave everyone who worked for him a contract and a guarantee, a

practice all but unheard of at the time. He paid for everything; food, accommodations, and all. It was no wonder he had all the top talent working for him. I had made about $300 a week working for Von Erich, and now I had a contract promising me $500 a week, as well as expense money. Jim knew how to take care of us. His colleagues should have taken note. It would have ensured stronger territories and an almost endless stream of talent.

Another reason wrestlers lined up to wrestle for him was the fact that, in addition to room and board and all travel expenses, we flew everywhere. A good part of the territory was so spread out that it would take days to get from town to town, so he chartered a plane for us. We would wrestle in Adelaide on Wednesday, Brisbane on Thursday, and Sydney on Friday. On Saturday, we flew to Melbourne, and once a month, we would wrestle in Perth and do spot shows in some of the smaller cities.

Jim sent his entire crew round-trip tickets to and from Australia. His roster was a veritable international who's who of wrestling, including Dr. Bill Miller and Killer Kowalski [Wladek Kowalski] from the United States, Mario Milano from Italy, Spiros Arion [Andres Labrakis] from Greece, and Billy Robinson from England. Mario and Spiros stayed and worked the year round. My old friend, Killer Karl Kox, was there, as was "Flying" Fred Curry [Fred Koury Jr.] out of Detroit, Paul Demarco from Georgia, Lars Anderson [Larry Heiniemi] from Minnesota, and Dick Murdoch from Texas. Australia's population was about one-third Aussies, one-third Italians, and one-third Greeks. We worked to sell-out crowds everywhere. Jim always had a Greek and an Italian working for him.

Jim's tours of Australia lasted three months. By constantly rotating talent in and out of the country, Jim kept the fans coming back to his shows night after night. It was great for the wrestlers, too, because they got great payoffs and time out of the

normal ring wars in the states. It was the best three months I had spent in the business up to that time, not only because of the competition there, but also the new opportunities it afforded me.

Television was strong there, and Jim had one of the first nationwide wrestling shows in the history of the sport, so there was a lot exposure through interviews. I made the most of the opportunity to improve my skills on the microphone. I was able to work both tag team and single matches, and most of the time, I worked on the top of the card. Top talent, great beer, beautiful women, and a steady pay check ... I couldn't imagine life could get any better than that.

As I stated earlier, it was of the utmost importance to be able to get along as much as possible with the wrestlers with whom I was working. Being in a different country made it all the more important. I liked all the boys on the tour and there was a great deal of mutual respect. When you were 8,000 miles from home,

things went easier when everyone got along.

Almost all the boys there were aware of my background as an amateur and I think they respected that, mostly because a large number of them had been amateurs themselves. One, in particular, stood above them all in his prowess on the mat, a big man from Britain named Billy Robinson. I had more in common with Billy than I had with the other boys. We both experienced hard times when we grew up and didn't have much.

Billy's reputation was universal. Originally from Manchester, England, Billy began wrestling as a youngster and found his way to Wigan to train under the famous (in many opinions, infamous) Bert Assirati. Bert had been known for his ability and willingness to hurt his opponents in the ring. He seemed to enjoy showing off his sadistic tendencies in the ring and wasn't held in very high esteem by many of his fellow wrestlers. Assirati held the British heavyweight title for nearly a

decade in the 1940s, and again from 1955 to 1960. Interestingly enough, as tough as he was, he apparently refused to meet world champion Lou Thesz when Lou visited London. That would have been a match for the ages. Smart money would have been on Lou.

In addition to his work in the ring, Assirati trained in the "snakepit," which was the Wigan wrestling school that specialized in his strong suit, the art of hooking, or submission wrestling. Few could do it as well as Bert. Karl Gotch was one who could, and Billy Robinson was another.

With Billy being a "shooter," and with me being a proponent of the American amateur style, we became friends immediately. As we traveled around Australia together, we would engage in lively discussions on which style was better — the strength of the moves taught in Wigan or the finesse of the style I learned on the mats in Oklahoma. Hooking took a lot of skill because you had to be able to maneuver an opponent into a

position from which you could apply one of the submission holds. I had yet to meet anyone who could set me up and get me in position to apply their hold and have me submit.

Of course, neither one of us was able to convince the other that their style was second best. Billy saw this as a challenge of his ability as a "hooker." There was only one way to find out, or so we both though. One night in Melbourne, Billy and I were having a few beers in the hotel bar and got into another discussion on the merits of our particular styles of wrestling. When the bar closed at two o'clock in the morning, Billy and I bought a few six-packs of beer and headed back to my room on the seventh floor to continue our conversation.

After drinking a few more beers, and exchanging a few more words, we moved the furniture from my room into the hallway. Billy said, "Let me show you this move."

I said, "Okay," and after his demonstration, it was

my turn to say, "Let me show you this."

We traded moves back and forth, and as time passed, the moves got quicker and a little more forceful. He would demonstrate a counter, I would show a counter to the counter, and we were off and running. Or, off and wrestling, anyway. Man, he was tough. A lot of wrestlers I met throughout the years fancied themselves as shooters. In reality, they weren't adept at much more than demonstrating holds. "Let me show you this," or "Let me show you that." The real test, though, was whether or not they could apply those submission holds during the heat of an actual match. Most of those guys suffered from delusions of grandeur. They couldn't hit those moves if their lives depended on it. Bill, however, was the exception. If he demonstrated a move, he could hit it from anywhere in any situation.

Billy and I wrestled for ten minutes, at which time we stopped, had another couple of beers, and then went at it again. We repeated that scenario

several times. I broke a couple of fingers on his right hand and he almost broke my foot. My ankle was sprained so severely that I could barely put any weight on it. Even worse, I couldn't get my wrestling boot on over it. I can only imagine what the other guests in that part of the hotel thought was happening, and I always wondered why we weren't thrown out of the hotel that night. Just lucky, I guess.

The next morning, Billy and I didn't look so lucky. Our faces were swollen, hands and ankles working far less easily than they had a few hours earlier, and we had a plane to catch to get to Adelaide for a match that evening. I think it was a combination of hangovers and pain that kept us from getting to the airport on time. Barnett didn't wait around for us. The plane left at nine o'clock as scheduled, with two less passengers (who were in no condition to walk and certainly in no shape to wrestle).

Fortunately for us, there was a later plane that

day. Billy and I purchased tickets and were on board in plenty of time for takeoff. When we arrived in Adelaide late that afternoon, Jim was waiting for us at the airport. To say he was angry would be an understatement; he was livid. He walked back and forth, waved his arms, screamed at us, and ranted and raved about us missing the plane. He was ready to fire us and send us back home. When Billy and I finally managed to get in a few words, we explained to him what had happened. He calmed down a bit and eventually agreed to let us stay and keep our jobs.

We were seriously worried about Jim letting us go. He ran a tight ship, and if you screwed up, he would send you packing before you could draw your next breath. He let Fred Curry go just because he disagreed with him. Every Friday, Jim would meet with all of his wrestlers in Sydney before the matches would start. Fred was constantly contradicting Jim and telling him how he could do things better. Finally, Jim had enough. At the meeting in Sydney, Fred had, once

again, told Jim what he thought was a better way to run things. Jim turned to him and said, "Fred, my boy. I don't want you to have to labor under these circumstances. Here is a ticket for you to go back to the States tomorrow."

We all just sat there wide eyed, looking at the floor. We didn't want to look up, afraid Jim would send us home with Fred. "But, Jim. But, Jim," Fred kept saying, in an attempt to plead his case.

Jim looked at him and said, "Fred, there is no 'But Jim.' Goodbye." And that was that. The next morning Fred was gone. Billy and I were, indeed, lucky that Jim calmed down and kept us on the tour.

Billy's job was a little higher up the ladder than mine. He was Barnett's champion. Jim was smart enough to know the value of the world heavyweight championship, but with Australia a world away, and with the world champion booked

every night in the States, there was no way to get him to defend his belt for one night, let alone an entire tour. So, that being the case, Jim did the next best thing. In 1964, he had a belt made and crowned his own world champion. When I arrived in Australia, Killer Karl Kox held the belt, but lost it to Billy.

I did have another memorable match with Billy. This one, however, took place in the ring. Billy hit moves in the ring I had never seen before. He used the double-arm suplex and was the first person I saw who would drop his opponent's leg across his knee as a counter to a headlock. I used both of those moves extensively later in my career, especially the leg across the knee as a set-up for my figure-four leglock.

Billy trained like a madman. He had two cauliflower ears and his nose was spread all over his face. Cauliflower ears, the result of combat almost exclusive to wrestling, occur due to headlocks, or other holds that places pressure on

the head and ears. Pressure on the ears causes the cartilage in the ears to break down, and the cartilage is replaced with fluid. If the fluid isn't drained, it calcifies, and the ear takes on a somewhat grotesque shape. The more this happens, the worse the ear looks. Since wrestlers are on the road every night, there was little time or inclination to see a doctor. If you were able to see a doctor, he would drain the ear and place a cast on it, which meant you would be unable to wrestle for weeks. Nobody could afford to take the time off, so we just ignored the problem.

Regarding what I said about the ear taking on a grotesque shape. It was grotesque to some, but to a wrestler, a cauliflower ear was a badge of honor, and in Billy's case, he would be considered a five-star general.

I wrestled Billy for his "world" title in Brisbane. The problem we encountered there was that the auditorium didn't have a wrestling ring. They had a boxing ring. To most fans, the

difference is minimal because they look almost identical. To wrestlers, though, there is all the difference in the world between the two. Boxing rings have a steel post underneath the framing in the center, so the canvas has little, if any, "give" to it. Wrestling rings have a good amount of give in order to lessen the impact of a body slam, or any other type of collision, while boxing rings needed more support so the fighters had better footing. Then again, I'm sure most of the boys would agree that wrestling in a ring designed for boxing is a little better than wrestling on the concrete floor of the auditorium.

Forty minutes or so into the match, Billy scooped me up and body-slammed me with great force. Unfortunately, I landed directly on the steel post in the middle of the ring. I don't remember much more than that because I blacked out on impact. The next thing I recall was being loaded into an ambulance and having no feeling in my legs. I was paralyzed below the waist and half a world from home. All sorts of thoughts flew

through my brain: Would I ever walk again? How would I get back to Oklahoma? Was my wrestling career over?

After a few hours in the hospital, the feeling in my legs slowly began to return. The doctors told me the x-rays indicated that my back wasn't broken. It was simply bruised and swollen. When the swelling went down, I was able to move again.

Billy was extremely apologetic for what had happened, but there were no hard feelings on my part. It was an accident, pure and simple; an unfortunate part of our business. As concerned as he was, Billy and the other boys couldn't come see me in the hospital. They had work to do and a tour to complete. For the first time since I could remember, I felt totally alone. Two days later, though, I was back in the ring.

Another star I met in Australia was Brute Bernard [Jim Bernard]. Of all the wrestlers I followed as a kid, he had been one of my favorites. I always

liked the heels. They were more fun to watch and to root for. The first time I saw Brute walk into the dressing room, I was more than a bit frightened of him. I sat in my small corner of the dressing room and tried not to make eye contact with him. His gimmick was that he acted like he was not quite "all there" as far as his mental faculties were concerned. He would enter the ring and walk around, bobbing his shaved head like a rooster, and hollering out "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" He was convincing enough that I tried to stay out of his way for a good part of the tour. While Billy had the moves that could injure someone in the ring, Brute could just look your way and send you looking for cover. In reality, Brute was Jim Bernard from Montreal, Canada. He was very nice and, being a Frenchman, spoke very little English. What English he did speak, I could barely understand.

One night, he went to Barnett and said, "Geeve me the keed. I'll work with him." Jim wouldn't consider it, at first. He wasn't about to have one of his top stars job to a young babyface. Brute,

however, wasn't one to take no for an answer, so he kept after him until Jim gave in and put us together. When I heard I would be booked with him, I began to feel the same dread I felt when I lost the feeling in my legs. I would be in the ring with an unstable mountain of a man. It almost made me question my choice of careers. Brute weighed close to 280, while I tipped the scales around 235.

However, Brute was a true professional. He put me over every time we wrestled. He didn't have to do it. He had chosen to do so. He saw a new kid trying to make a name for himself in the business and wanted to help him. The fans who saw us wrestle would never believe the menacing Brute was a kind man who was giving a young kid a break. It was Brute who made me in Australia. God rest his soul.

On five different occasions from 1966 through 1969, Brute had been one half of Barnett's world tag team champions with Skull Murphy [John

Murphy] as his partner. In fact, they wrestled together all over the world. Skull reportedly lost all his hair due to a childhood illness. I don't know if that was true. He never talked about it. True or not, he made the most of it as he parlayed his intimidating looks into becoming one of the greatest heels who ever appeared in a wrestling ring. Outside the ring, however, they both were quiet family men who kept to themselves. I consider it a pleasure to have known them.

Sadly, they both died tragically by their own hands, years apart. As the story goes, in real life, Skull was a nervous individual. He had lost his father [as a young man] and his older brother to stomach cancer. Somewhere along the line, when he and Brute were wrestling for Jim Crockett in Charlotte, he began to experience stomach cramps. Remembering the anguish his father and brother had gone through, he decided to forgo seeing a physician and ended his life by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. When his wife

discovered his body on the couch, she called George Scott; a friend, a fellow wrestler, and one of the best bookers the sport has ever known. George wasted no time getting there and called the authorities. The Skulls, as Brute and Skull were known, were scheduled to headline the card in Charlotte that night, March 23, 1970. George cancelled the card out of respect. John Murphy was only 39 years old.

Brute's death was ironically similar, but accidental in nature. Many years after he left the ring, Jim was showing his son how to handle a gun safely. Thinking the gun was unloaded, he pointed the gun towards himself and said, "Never do this." He pulled the trigger and shot himself, tragically ending his life. There are other versions of this story, but no matter where the truth lies, the wrestling world lost two great performers.

I also had an opportunity to wrestle "Classy" Freddie Blassie in Australia. I had read about him in the magazines when he held the World Wrestling

Association world heavyweight championship in Los Angeles.

Born in St. Louis shortly after his parents emigrated from Germany following World War I, Freddie started out as an amateur boxer, but he became interested in wrestling by watching the shooters on the mat in the gym where he worked out. After serving for nearly four years in the Navy in the Pacific Theatre, he went to work for wrestling promoter Tom Packs in St. Louis. In order to capitalize on the surge of American patriotism that came about after the war, he also wrestled as "Sailor" Freddie Blassie for Jack Pfefer.

Never quite making it as a babyface, Freddie headed west and turned heel in Los Angeles, where he became one of the biggest stars in the sport. He was a top card throughout the south, Japan, and Australia. Blassie was so over as a villain that his car was set on fire one night in Georgia. Freddie loved every minute of it.

By the time we met in the ring, he was nearing the end of his career. The only thing notable I can recall about that match was that I was afraid to mix it up with him. I wasn't afraid he would hurt me. On the contrary; he moved so slowly in the ring and he was so much older than me, I was afraid I would accidentally hurt him.

Fred went on to work with Vince McMahon for the WWWF and WWF as a goodwill ambassador, visiting military bases, hospitals, and countless other places, all of which welcomed him with open arms. Everyone enjoyed his endless charm. Sadly "the Hollywood Fashion Plate," as he called himself, passed away from kidney and heart failure on June 2, 2003 in Hartsdale, New York. He will be missed as the great showman and friend he was to millions of fans.

My three months in Australia passed by quickly and I hated it when the time came to leave. On the flip side, I also missed my home and family, and I wanted to see if Karen and I could make our

marriage work or not.

Chapter 13
Tallahassee Convection Oven

Back in Oklahoma, it didn't take long to realize my marriage was over. We both knew it. I never was home, and to continue to make a living, I had to be on the road. It didn't make sense for the two of us to continue to be miserable. Whenever I came home from a territory, I was home only long enough to spend time with the kids and repack my suitcase, before moving on once again.

Before I had left for Australia, I had kept in contact with Joe Scarpa. He had been getting over like never before in Florida and was having the time of his life. Joe told me he had already talked to the promoter, Eddie Graham, about me. Graham wanted to meet me. He was constantly looking for new talent and was a fan and supporter of amateur

wrestling, so he saw the possibility of making some money with me. I had always wanted to see Florida, so I figured the worse that could happen was that I wouldn't get over and I'd have to return to Oklahoma. At least I would have the opportunity to wrestle in another state and against new opponents. I arrived in Tampa in August 1968. I never could have imagined that my career would take off from there.

Eddie Graham was a genius where wrestling was concerned. He never graduated from high school, but if anyone knew the business from every angle, it was Eddie. He had done it all, from being a top card in the ring to running one of the most successful promotions in the world. If there was a place for me to learn and take my career to the next level, Florida was it. When I first talked to Eddie about going to work for him, he told me he would give me a chance to prove myself if I would be willing to follow his lead. I was beginning to learn more about how promoters thought and operated. I had met some of the best, and on the

flip side of the coin, some of the worst. I had heard Eddie was a man of his word, and having nothing to lose, I took him up on his offer.

Eddie, whose real last name was Gossett, grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He first entered the ring two years after World War II had ended at the age of seventeen in his hometown. Paydays must have been different back then. Eddie told me that, in lieu of money, he once received a 25-pound turkey for his services. He did well as a single wrestler, but most of his early recognition came as a member of the infamous Graham "family." As with most brothers in wrestling, they were not brothers at all. There were exceptions, of course. George and Sandy Scott, Dory and Terry Funk, the Stu Hart family, and the Von Erichs were a few of the authentic families in wrestling, as well as Gerry and me.

Eddie had teamed with his brother, Dr. Jerry Graham (not a real doctor either), to set the northeast on fire as the United States tag team

champions in the late 1950s. The Grahams wrestled to packed houses wherever they appeared. Whether with Jerry, or his other "brother," Crazy Luke Graham, they brought down the house as thousands of fans paid top prices in the hopes of seeing the villainous Graham family lose their titles and get the punishment they deserved. More than one riot broke out due to their treachery in the ring. That didn't happen often, but the fans bought tickets and the promoters were smiling. In 1952, Eddie turned his sights south and ended up in Florida, where his appearances gave a major boost to the struggling wrestling scene there. His success continued when he became partners with the Florida promoter, C.P. (Cowboy) Luttrall. When Luttrall was unable to continue promoting due to failing health, Eddie took over the promotion.

As good as he was in the ring, his wrestling skills paled in comparison to what he accomplished outside of it. As I stated before, Eddie had been a strong advocate of amateur wrestling. He was

instrumental in establishing wrestling in high schools throughout the state, wrestling camps, and a wrestling scholarship for the University of Tampa. He also donated money to help start a wrestling team at the University of Florida. He gave tirelessly of his time to charities such as the Boys Club, The Tampa Sports Club, and the Florida Sheriff's Boys Ranch. Eddie believed his responsibilities extended to his community, as much as it did to his family and his business.

Eddie was in complete charge in Florida. There certainly was no doubt about that, but he couldn't do it all. Every town had its own promoter. They took care of the details: setting up radio and television advertising, distributing posters, lining up the venue where the matches took place, overseeing the ring set up, and a myriad of other things that made the matches go smoothly for the wrestlers and the fans. Folks like Coach John Heath [Sarasota], Pat O'Hara [Fort Myers], Chris Dundee [Miami], Milo Steinborn [Orlando], and a great friend and outstanding amateur and

professional champion from Buffalo, Don Curtis [Jacksonville]. They were all hard workers. They didn't have anything to do with the storylines or booking the matches. Their job was to take care of the publicity and the logistics. Graham took care of the angles.

Eddie also grew in power and prestige in the political world of wrestling. He served on the board of directors for the National Wrestling Alliance for several years and was elected president three times.

Personally, I have to credit Eddie with my rise through the ranks and for helping me gain the national prominence I did. If it hadn't been for Eddie and his friendship, I may never had won the world heavyweight title ... or even gotten near it. He was a true friend and didn't hesitate to butt heads with his longtime friend, Dory Funk Sr., when Senior tried to maneuver the world title away from me. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The later years were not as kind to Eddie. He had been fighting alcoholism for a long time and was despondent over a downturn in business and marital problems. He had talked to me about his despair and, at one point, told me he was seriously thinking about suicide. I called a longtime friend and parish priest named Father Higgins and asked him to talk to Eddie. They got together a number of times, but eventually, Eddie's problems became more than he could handle. On Super Bowl Sunday, January 21, 1985, he put a gun to his head and took his own life.

In most of the territories I had worked, you had one day off during the week — Sunday — to heal and catch your breath. That wasn't the case in the Florida territory. We wrestled every night and, at times, twice a day. Not only that, but Eddie ran two towns a night. On Monday, we were booked in either Orlando or West Palm Beach. We wrestled in Tampa or Fort Myers on Tuesday. That was my favorite day since most of us lived in Tampa and didn't have to travel. I

wrestled occasionally in Fort Myers, but not too often. On Wednesday, we worked in Miami Beach at the Auditorium. We wrestled in Jacksonville at the Coliseum on Thursday and in the large convection oven known as the Sportatorium in Tallahassee on Friday. I sincerely believe that if Dante had ever attended wrestling in Tallahassee on a typical Friday evening in August, he would have added another level to Hades in Paradise Lost. The Sportatorium was a large, tin building that seemed as old as wrestling itself. There was little, if any, ventilation and, when 3,000 fans packed the place in the summer, the temperature would easily reach 130 degrees. There was only one side door in the main section of the building where we wrestled. They tried to keep it open to help with the air flow, but it may as well have been bricked up for all the good it did.

There were no regular towns on Saturday. Instead, Eddie took matches on the road and we would end the week in places like Lakeland, Winter Haven, Arcadia, Sarasota, and

others.

Getting back to my arrival in Florida, when I first got there, I wondered if there was a place for me. I had never seen so much top talent in one place. I had been in some strong territories that had a good deal of top talent, but nothing like there was in Florida at that time. Regulars there at the time included Jose Lothario, Red Bastien, Johnny Valentine, Sam Steamboat, Joe Scarpa, Dale Lewis, Hans Mortier, and the Great Malenko. They were selling out in every arena throughout the state. So, it wasn't surprising that when I first got there, I was regulated to the curtain jerker, or opening match. If I was lucky, Eddie would move me up to the second match on the card. It wasn't where I wanted to be, but at least I was working more than two minutes a night. My matches would go about ten to fifteen minutes. I wasn't getting put over much, either, but again, I was working with the best in the business and learning invaluable lessons that would serve me well in the future.

One of my first matches there was with Louie Tillet [Louie Michaud], who was serving as Eddie's booker at that time. The booker was the person who set up the matches and determined the programs. Louie had been around for a long time and knew his way around the ring. He had quite a measure of success as a junior heavyweight and had won a number of regional titles and tag team titles, including the world tag team title [Georgia version] with "Fabulous Kangaroo" Al Costello in 1966.

On September 23, 1968 in Orlando, I was teaming with Jose Lothario and Sputnik Monroe against Louie, Tank Morgan and Eduardo Perez. After fifteen minutes or so passed, Louie took out a razor blade and put it between his teeth. Grabbing me by the hair and pulling my head forward, he ran the blade back and forth across my forehead. I bled all over the ring. That was, without a doubt, the angriest I had ever been in the ring. I wanted to tear him apart. Eddie was so mad that he threatened to fire him if he ever

tried anything like that again.

Louie had been after me to cut myself in a match for several weeks. I always refused. I never saw the value in it, although some of the boys did it every night. The promoters of the day thought a bloody match was a crowd-pleaser, and that more seats would be filled if the fans thought there was a chance of blood flowing. There is a saying among the boys that "red turns to green," meaning blood in the ring means money in the promoter's coffers. That may have been true, but it would have to be true without me. Of course, that also was before the inception of AIDS and other health concerns. Since I never would agree to use the blade myself, Louie had been determined to do it for me. To prove his point to the other wrestlers, he had everyone on the card watch the match from the back so they could see him cut me.

There had been no reason for doing that at all. In fact, I think Joe Scarpa was angrier than I was, if that was possible. He was so angry that he told

Eddie he was taking me to the Carolinas to work for Crockett. He screamed at him "This guy can make you a lot of money and you're letting this stuff happen. Are you nuts?" It never happened again.

Joe stood up for me, so there wasn't much left for me to say. As angry as I was, I still knew it was important to get along. I hadn't been in the territory long enough to cause any problems or make any demands. I believed that if I said too much, Louie might send me packing or relegate me to the undercard forever.

Joe also gave me some of the best advice I ever received. "Take all your amateur medals and trophies and put them away. They may have meant a lot when you were in college, but they mean nothing here, not now. Pack them away and forget about them. When you are finished and your career is over, go home and take them out again. Do this and you will get along very well." As usual, Joe was right.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention more about Joe here. Joe had a great influence on my career. He opened a lot of doors and went to bat for me when nobody else even knew who I was. He treated me like a son. In fact, he didn't always teach me with kind words and actions. When he needed it, he would use chastisement.

One night in Jacksonville, Joe and I were working in a tag team match against Johnny Valentine and Boris Malenko. The finish of the match was set to generate a return single match between Joe and Johnny. In the dressing room before the match, Joe instructed me on what to do during the match. For some reason (and I can't recall what that reason may have been), I decided to ignore his direction and do things my own way. I suppose I was feeling pretty cocky, and with all my vast experience of those few years, I thought I knew better.

Well, whatever I did didn't work, and I came

close to screwing up the match. Afterwards, back in the dressing room, Joe chewed me out like I had never been chewed out before in my life. Man, was he angry. He told me I had better listen to him and not fool around with his livelihood. I remember being almost as mad at him as he was at me for yelling at me that way, but deep down, I knew he was right. I never did anything like that again and I never forgot what he said.

Joe also coached me on how to be a better worker, and showed me things that would draw money. Those were two things he was serious about. I learned quickly that when he talked, you had better listen. If you didn't, he was through with you. He wouldn't waste his time trying to convince you. He would simply stop talking to you. It was his way or no way if you wanted to work with him. He wasn't trying to control what was going on. He just knew the business inside and out.

Although professional wrestling is more of an

exhibition than a competition, it still remains a very competitive sport. Some guys will do anything to ensure getting ahead. They may try to hurt you in the ring, or embarrass you by trying to make you look clumsy, inept, or just plain stupid. To have a good match that will get over with the fans, both wrestlers have to do their best to make each other look as good as possible. I always made that my goal, and so did most of the boys, but there were times when I was forced to make an exception.

Many times, when a new wrestler would be starting out and it looked like he had the potential to do well, there would be some who felt threatened. They would do everything they could to cut short his stay in the territory. I saw that in Texas with both the Funks and the Von Erichs. Florida wasn't as bad. There were guys there who tried, but I was smarter and wouldn't let it bother me too much. Fortunately, I had people like Joe to look out for me. When a guy would try to hurt or embarrass me, Joe would pull me aside

and say, "Jack, why are you putting up with this crap? Why don't you just take the guy? You know you can." That was one thing I wouldn't do. I always tried to get along with everyone I worked with, no matter how they treated me and whether they deserved it or not.

Joe was a great coach. He taught me how to fire up during a match, how to get the crowd involved, and how to react when a heel did something dirty to me in the ring. I was totally green and I soaked it all in like a sponge. Joe used every available circumstance to teach me. As soon as my match was over, he would pull me aside and tell me what I did wrong and how to correct my mistakes.

When I first started wrestling, I thought the wrestlers planned a match from the beginning to the end — moves, holds, finishes, and all. Joe told me, "You never plan a match. You have the ending planned, and how long you want it to go, but what goes on from the opening bell to the end, you just let happen. The important thing is to react to what

your opponent does."

Today, the wrestlers don't do a lot of reacting. Their method of work is to go through a series of routines, rather than reacting. That isn't necessarily bad, but if you see two guys wrestle each other three or four times, you will pretty much see the same match, the same high spots, and the same finishes.

By reacting in the ring, you can wrestle the same opponent a dozen times and the fans will see a dozen different matches. Joe taught me how to react to my opponent and how to work a good match. That came as a great help to me when I held the world championship. As the world champion, I had to travel and wrestle in a different town every night, and usually against an opponent I had never wrestled before. We didn't have time to "plan" a match. We would simply work and react. Joe's lessons were invaluable to me. It all was just a matter of timing. If you missed a spot, you lost the moment, and you may not get the

opportunity to do that spot again in the match. That's why professional wrestling is looked at as being both a sport and art.

Joe Scarpa was like Johnny Valentine in that respect. He was a master of psychology. He had it down to a science. I believe the most important thing Joe taught me was how to play to the crowd. He said I had to believe what was taking place in the ring, because if I didn't believe it, the fans wouldn't, either. A well-worked match would bring the fans to their feet, make them want to come to the apron of the ring, and sit them back down again. The crowd fed off of what went on in the ring, and in return, we would feed off of their emotion. As far as Joe was concerned, that was what the wrestling business was all about.

One night, Joe and I were working against each other in a babyface match in Orlando, and he had me in an overhand wristlock. The overhand wristlock is one of the most basic holds in wrestling. There is nothing flashy about it at

all. It's like a jab in boxing. It's about as standard as it gets. Anyway, Joe had me in the hold and, because of his action and my reaction, the fans went crazy.

I loved working with Joe. We wrestled each other one time in Texas. I shot in on a single leg, accidentally caught his knee, and took it out. I didn't realize it at the time and kept working on it. He kept telling me, "Jack, my knee. My knee is out." Joe was known as one of the biggest "ribbers" in the business. I thought he was just kidding me, so I kept shooting in on it and applying the pressure. "Jack! Dammit! You really hit my knee. I'm not kidding. Let it go!" The tone of his voice left no doubt in my mind that he wasn't kidding. I released his leg instantly. "I'm sorry, Joe," I told him. "I thought you were ribbing me. I am so sorry."

Another time, we were both competing in a battle royal with eighteen other wrestlers, including my brother Gerry. A battle royal is a wrestling match

in the most general of terms ... that being that wrestlers participate in it. Otherwise, it has no resemblance to wrestling at all. Sometimes there are ten men, sometimes 20; it all depended on how many guys were on the card that evening. A battle royal was used as an extra main event after all the other matches were over. The fans loved seeing 20 guys in the ring at one time. They usually were a lot of fun because it was something different for all the boys. None of us ever took the battle royals very seriously.

The object of the battle royal was to be the last one standing after throwing everyone else over the top rope. The prize for the winner was always lofty. It would be advertised as the winner would receive a $5,000 or $10,000 purse, or the grandest prize of all, a new Cadillac. Of course, the boys never would receive more than a normal payoff. As the song says, "This ain't no never-never land."

As we got into the ring for the circus in the

squared circle, Joe came over to me and said, "Let's rib Gerry and eliminate him first."

I said, "Yeah, Joe. That's a great idea. Let's do it."

I went around the ring and told everybody, "Joe's got it all planned out," meaning "Let's get Joe." When the bell rang, everyone in the ring went after Joe and tossed him over the top rope. Joe hit the floor and yelled "Damn you, Brisco." He couldn't have been too angry; he was smiling while he said it. Joe was always thinking of ways to rib the boys, especially me, so I would turn things around on him whenever I had the opportunity.

There were times, however, when Joe and I were on the same side of a rib. After the matches one night in Nassau, we were in a bar having a drinking contest with Ricky Hunter [Charles Sprott], who was wrestling under a mask as the Gladiator. Outside, behind the bar, was a canal,

which spawned an idea that seemed to occur to Joe and me at the same time. We were walking along the canal on the way back to the hotel. Joe and I looked at each other and said in unison, "Let's get Rick," and we pushed him into the canal.

What we didn't know at the time was that the tide was going out, and we hadn't given much thought to how high the walls of the canal were. The water looked shallow and we assumed he could just climb out. Well, there really wasn't any way he could reach the top of the wall. He jumped up and down, while we shouted our loud, ineffective encouragement. Rick had to swim almost 200 yards before he found a place shallow enough to climb out.

When he finally got out, not only was he sober, but he was hot. Joe and I tried to apologize, but it was hard for him to hear our apologies through our laughter. We were sorry, though, and that was the last time we ribbed Rick.

Ricky was always trying to impress the boys by using "big words." Joe called him the professor because he always wanted to show us how much he knew, or at least thought he knew. We drove by some fruit trees one day and Rick said, "Hey, Joe. See those prune trees?"

Prune trees! I looked at Joe in the rear-view mirror and he had a look of astonishment on his face. When we drove past a vineyard a little further down the road, he commented on all the beautiful "raisin bushes."

After he would use one of his impressive words, Joe would turn to me and ask, "Jack, is he using the right word?" I would say, "No," and Joe would say, "Then why the hell don't you say something?" Hell, I was just a young kid. I wasn't about to say anything.

When I first met Joe in Texas, he ribbed me about my college career. He told me I wasn't the only former college wrestler in the territory. He told

me he had wrestled for Nutley University. I had wrestled against nearly every college at one time or another, but I had never heard of Nutley University; but then again, I was just a green kid. Who was I to question him? It wasn't until years later that I figured out that Nutley University was where Joe went to school in New Jersey ... but it wasn't Nutley University. It was Nutley High School.

Joe was quite a golfer and played all the time. I haven't played in more years than I can recall, but there was a time when I played a little, if for no other reason than to pass the time between matches. On a good day when I was hot, I could play a pretty good round of golf. Joe, being so much better than me, would graciously give me a stroke a hole and we would bet a dollar a hole. One afternoon, I was playing like a man possessed. I was hitting every drive right down the fairway and sinking every putt. By the time we were halfway through the course, Joe wanted out of the bet. There was no way I was going to let

him off that easily.

My granddaddy always told me, "When you get a fish on the hook, you never let him go." The harder Joe tried, the worse he played. Every time he would make a bad shot, I would rib him about it, which caused him to insist on increasing the stakes. I was on my way to pocketing $25 of Joe's money. Remember that was in the late '60s and early '70s, and $25 was a lot of money. Some nights, we wouldn't even make $25. Joe got so angry that he could hardly talk, let alone play golf. At one point, he threatened to wrap his club around my head. Joe had me laughing so hard I could hardly stand up. It was a lot more fun to spend Joe's money than it was to spend mine.

In the 1970s, there still was an aura of mystery to professional wrestling. You could actually tell a fan, "Yeah, wrestling is fake," and they would argue with you: "No, it's not. I saw this or that happen in the ring, so it can't be fake." There is no more mystery these days, but fans are still packing

the arenas and enjoying the entertainment the boys are putting on for them.

I'm jumping ahead of my story, but around the time I won the world title from Harley Race, Joe created his Chief Jay Strongbow gimmick. He made a fortune with that character. He wouldn't just wear the headdress in the ring. He was Jay Strongbow in the ring, as well as out of it. He would study old western films to learn the theatrical mannerisms of the Indians. Remember, wrestling is show business, and there is no better way to learn a new gimmick than from the movies. The "war dance" he performed before his finishing tomahawk chop brought the fans to their feet every time. The fans believed it because Joe believed it.

It didn't take long for me to figure out one of the reasons Eddie wanted me to come to Florida. His son, Mike, was trying to break into the business and he wanted me to work out with Mike and show him some things in the ring. In short, he wanted me

to take care of Mike. Eddie was somewhat of a frustrated amateur wrestler and would have liked nothing better than to have won a national title. I had barely unpacked my bags when Eddie had me out on the ranch and in the ring with his kid.

Mike had the desire to be a wrestler, but he didn't have the aptitude, discipline, or interest. We worked out together, but he achieved little success. I tried to coach him and show him things in the ring, but he didn't seem all that interested. He seemed far more interested in taking the easy road through life, getting by on his father's name and money. From day one, he impressed me as a rich kid, interested in nothing more than having a good time and spending Daddy's money. The lessons didn't last too long. Besides, I wasn't there to train the promoter's son. I was there to make a living. I had my fill of daddy's boys in West Texas.

Within two months, however, things were going well for me in Florida. I thought I was ready for

the big time, especially after my tours of Australia and Japan, but I learned that I would just have to wait my turn ... again. Eddie Graham booked me more often and in higher-profile matches. I had some broadways, but I won more matches than I lost. I was working with some of the best workers in the business and gaining experience ... the type of experience a wrestler needs to get to the top.

I didn't have to wait too long for my run on top. As they had in Texas when I worked for Fritz, a lot of the guys began to leave. Several of them had been in the territory for months and were ready to move on to other places. Wrestlers move around a lot. No matter how popular you are as a babyface or as a heel, you can only work so many programs before even the most creative bookers run out of ideas and fans become restless for something and someone new. Restless fans are dangerous for the promoters. When the fans begin to get bored, they stop coming to the arenas. When attendance suffers, there isn't as much money coming into the box office and, as with all

businesses, that means trouble. As some of the headliners moved on and new wrestlers came in, I was in a good position to move up the card. I had been there for a couple of months and was gaining in popularity.

On October 31, 1968, Eddie put me on television in a tag team match with Nick Kozak as my partner. We clicked as a team and Eddie moved us up the card to semi-final and main-event status, programming us against the Masked Medics. Underneath the masks at that time were two really good hands — Billy Garrett and Jim Starr. They dressed in white singlets, tights, and masks. At the time, their original manager, Ken Ramey, had left because Eddie wanted him to manage other wrestlers, in addition to the Medics. When I was there, they were managed by Dick Dunn, who also wore a mask and called himself the Good Doctor. Dick had been one of the original Medics in Florida [along with Billy Garrett] in 1966, but Jim Starr took his place when Dick left the territory. Both incarnations of the

Medics [Dunn-Garrett and Garrett-Starr] were good heel teams.

One interesting piece of history is that the combination of Garrett and Starr were the first team to hold the Florida tag team title, winning it in a tournament on December 10, 1968.

Chapter 14
The Good Doctor

The year 1969 ushered in a new era in wrestling. Shortly after I turned pro, one of my all-time idols, Lou Thesz, lost his world heavyweight championship for the last time. Lou began wrestling at the age of sixteen and, under the tutelage of five-time world heavyweight champion Ed "Strangler" Lewis, became the youngest man ever to win the world heavyweight wrestling title. At the young age of 21, on December 30, 1937 in St. Louis, Lou shocked the world by defeating reigning champion Everette Marshall. At six-foot-three and 225 pounds, Lou moved like a panther in the ring. As Harley Race once said, "Lou could just look at you and hurt you."

Thesz was all business in the ring and the consummate gentleman outside of it. He had no patience for the part of wrestling that wasn't

actually wrestling. Showmanship in the ring was one thing, but taking it to the extreme was not. That standard alone set Lou apart from just about everyone else in wrestling. His skills carried him to six world championships and to all corners of the globe as he set the standard for all of us who followed.

At one time, he held the title for a period of twelve years (with a few months off, putting it the care and capable hands of "Whipper" Billy Watson). Lou was all but unbeatable and would only agree to drop the title to a wrestler he respected, which was someone who could actually wrestle.

In 1963, Lou defeated "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers [Herman Rohde Jr.] in Toronto to win the title for the sixth and final time, surpassing the record of his mentor Ed (Strangler) Lewis. Lou once told me he hadn't been too excited about the idea of a sixth title reign. He had been in his early fifties and had been on the road for nearly 30

years, most of the time as champion, but the sport needed him as its standard bearer one more time.

On a snow-filled, winter evening, Lou did the honors one last time when, on January 7, 1966, he dropped the title to Gene Kiniski.

Not only was Lou my idol, but a close friend and mentor, as well. Lou taught me as much about the business, inside the ring and out, as anyone. He was, without a doubt, the greatest man I ever saw in the ring. There was none better. Shortly before his death on April 28, 2002, just after his 86th birthday, Lou and his lovely wife, Charlie, moved to Florida from Virginia. That gave us the chance to see each other more frequently, reminisce, and laugh about the old days. Not a day goes by that I don't think of him.

There weren't many wrestlers like Lou Thesz around. In fact, there weren't many men like Lou Thesz, period.

When I began my run in Florida, the world champion was Gene Kiniski. Gene wasn't even twelve years old when Lou Thesz won the title for the first time, and now, at the age of 40, "Big Thunder" was the man to beat. He stood six-foot-four and weighed in at 260 pounds. Gene began wrestling as a teenager in the local YMCA in his hometown of Alberta. Referring to himself as "Canada's Greatest Athlete," he entered the ring after a storied football career at Arizona State University, and later, with the Edmonton Eskimos. A knee injury in 1953 ended his days on the gridiron and Gene set his sights on wrestling.

He turned professional in Tucson and hit it big two years later in Los Angeles when he teamed up with Lord James Blears. Gene, a great heel who brought people to the arenas and had them charge the ring during his matches, was just the opposite outside the ring. He was an engaging man with a wonderful sense of humor. As I began to gain some recognition, I wrestled Gene many times. Surprisingly enough, all but a few of our

matches took place in either St. Louis or British Columbia. I only wrestled him a couple of times in Florida. We had great matches before, during, and after my championship run.

Kiniski drew well during his years as champion. Drawing on the conventional wisdom of the day, that a heel champion drew better than a babyface champion, Gene wrestled before packed houses. Fans came to the arenas in the hopes of seeing their local favorite wrest the coveted belt from the grasp of the giant Canadian, only to walk away disappointed for three years. That is, until the night of February 11, 1969, at Fort Homer Hesterly Armory in Tampa.

That night would prove to be a turning point in professional wrestling history, but to the boys on the card that night, as far as we knew, it was just another show on a balmy Tuesday night. I had worked about midway up on the card, winning the southern heavyweight title from the Missouri Mauler [Larry Hamilton]. None of us in the

dressing room had any idea that Dory Funk Jr. would leave the Armory that night as the new world heavyweight champion, a goal I one day hoped to achieve for myself.

In those days, when a major title like the NWA world heavyweight title changed hands, only the participants and the referee knew it was going to happen. In fact, I went home after my match and didn't know how the main event ended until I heard it on the news the next morning. Had I known it was going to be an event of that significance, I would have stayed to watch the match. I regretted missing it. I just took the title from Larry and went home.

I hadn't thought too much about it when Dory and his father arrived in Tampa. I knew the old man and Eddie were friends, so I assumed Junior, being the old man's kid, was simply getting top shots around the country. I also thought they might be on vacation and Eddie talked Dory into wrestling while they were there. Most of us figured it was

just a matter of time before Junior won the title because he had been headlining almost every card on which he was booked. We just didn't think it would happen when it did.

Who would have thought that, at the age of 27, Junior would be the second youngest man to win the world title, and that Kiniski would drop the title on a Tuesday night in Tampa. I thought that when Dory's time came to take the belt, it would happen in a much bigger town and larger venue, like the Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis.

Nevertheless, Dory winning the title turned out to be a windfall for me. It was the beginning of a new day for the wrestling business. Times were changing in our country. People in their teens and twenties were coming into their own. Youth was in the spotlight and the sports world was no different. On January 12, 1969, "Broadway" Joe Namath and his underdog New York Jets shocked the Earl Morrell, Johnny Unitas, and an aging Baltimore Colts team in Super Bowl III, giving the

American Football League instant credibility alongside the National Football League. The era of the crew cut was over. Wrestling needed a young champion, and Dory, young and clean-cut, was the perfect choice. He talked politely on interviews, always appeared in a coat and tie (on advice he was given by Kiniski), and carried the title with a great deal of class.

Even his walk to the ring to defend his belt pegged him as a champion. He could wrestle, too. Whether he was in a 15-minute match, or a 90-minute broadway, Dory always gave the fans their money's worth. He had a great mind for wrestling and could work a match that would leave the fans exhausted at the sound of the final bell, and have them lined up at the box office to buy tickets for the rematch before they left for home.

Even as champion, he was always willing to work a broadway, drop a fall, or lose a non-title match to set up a rematch for the title. In many cases, he would lose the deciding fall in a tag

match to build a crowd for a title defense against the wrestler who pinned him. In a sport controlled by huge egos, Dory put business first. He was methodical in the ring and had his matches down to a science. He would work against any style of wrestler, but would control the match and his high spots, whether throwing his forearm or using his finishers. Most of his matches were won by the double-arm, or butterfly suplex I had first seen Billy Robinson use in Australia, or the spinning toehold, which was the signature move of the entire Funk clan.

A good example of how Junior worked is the program he had with my old pal, Joe Scarpa, a few months after Dory won the title. Joe was working in the Georgia territory at the time. Business was good in some towns and nearly dead in others. One of the towns on the decline was Columbus. Saying the town was in decline is being kind because Columbus was all but dead to wrestling. A once-thriving town, it was drawing only a couple of hundred people for its weekly

matches.

Fred Ward was the promoter and was doing everything he could think of to rebuild the audience. Fred figured if a world title defense didn't generate interest in the town, nothing would, so he booked Junior against Joe in a non-title match.

Before their turn came to wrestle, Junior sat down with Fred and Joe to set up the match. Knowing the plight Ward was facing in Columbus, he offered a solution. "This is what we'll do," Dory explained. "Shortly after the bell rings, Joe and I will criss-cross off the ropes and he'll catch me in his abdominal stretch."

"Okay," Fred agreed. "Then what?"

"Then I give up and Joe beats me. I fight to get out, but he is just too strong, so I submit," Dory said.

Fred thought it was a crazy idea. He didn't bring

the new world champion in to lose within a minute or so. How would that help him build the territory? What would that do to the status of Dory as champion? Dory, however, could be very persuasive. After all, he was the champion, so what leverage did Fred have against the guy who held the belt? So, Junior was able to convince Fred that ending the match that way would bring the fans back in droves when he returned to defend the title against Joe.

Two minutes after the opening bell, Junior was caught in Joe's finishing move, the abdominal stretch, in front of 500 fans. The crowd went berserk. The following week, when he returned to defend the title, the place was packed. They worked an hour draw, which found Junior trapped once again in Joe's stretch as the final minutes of the match ticked off. Dory kept trying to reach the ropes, which would force Joe to release the hold, but he just couldn't make it. The bell rang and Joe let Junior slump to the mat, still champion.

The following week, they sold out again. Columbus was no longer a dead town, thanks to Dory and Joe. Most champions wouldn't have used that scenario to set up a rematch. Dory was a master at psychology, and when he came to town, business was good. He was all business. He came into town to defend his title and move on to the next town. He wasn't there to socialize. In fact, he didn't. He wasn't unfriendly or arrogant. He was just quiet and focused on the task at hand.

The first time I worked with Dory when he was champion was in Miami on July 30, 1969. I was the Southern heavyweight champion at the time. That title was just about on equal footing with the Florida heavyweight title, so holding the belt put me in the race as one of the top competitors for the world title. I put Dory over, just like old times, but not in two minutes like I had in the past. The match went well. Several times during the match, it looked like I might even upset the new champion.

From time to time, Eddie would bring in special guest referees to keep order in a main event that had been promoted as an exceptionally-hot feud. Those referees were usually former wrestling champions or other notables from the world of sports. One of the most popular of those guest referees was Joe Louis, the "Brown Bomber." There wasn't a sports fan alive at the time who didn't know of Joe's accomplishments in the boxing ring and his 12-year reign as the heavyweight champion of the world.

When I first met Joe in Jacksonville in 1969, he was some 20 years past his prime. He first entered the ring as the third man in 1937 in a world title match with defending champion Jim Londos. Louis actually tried his hand at wrestling in the 1950s and remained undefeated in a less-than-stellar, short-lived career. His wrestling skills, however, were diametrically opposed to his boxing skills. He was injured during a match and quit the ring shortly thereafter. It has been theorized that the injury hastened the decline of his health. He

had fallen on tough financial times due to having $1,250,000 in back income taxes, plus interest and penalties, which dogged him almost to his dying day.

What saddened me the most about Joe was that he was a mere shadow of his former self. He was 55 years old, but he moved and acted like a man far more advanced in years. He was slow to speak, partially, I believe, because his mental skills were diminished from decades of brain-jarring blows to his head. He wasn't as bad as the pictures published of him made him appear in the years before his death, but the decline of his health had definitely begun. Even so, he was a true gentleman and a professional, both in and out of the ring. Always friendly and polite, he was as amiable and open as any champion I had ever met, before or since.

Joe's wife traveled with him to be sure he was where he should be and on time. She also made sure his payoff was correct and that he was treated

with the respect he had earned as champion. I never saw anyone treat him with disrespect. After all, he was Joe Louis, the champion of the world, who in the midst of his championship reign enlisted to fight the Axis powers in World War II, toured the armed forces (fighting 96 exhibitions before more than two million GIs), and donated more than one purse from title defenses to Army and Navy Relief Funds. As New York sports writer Jimmy Cannon wrote while Joe was still champion, "He was a credit to his race ... the human race."

Being around Joe during that time made me realize how important it was to retire from the ring in a timely manner. I promised myself that I would leave the ring on my own terms and when I decided. I would not stay around to the point where I couldn't walk away under my own power, or past the time when I no longer enjoyed what I was doing. I learned a lot from Joe on what sports can do to you if you aren't vigilant. It was a lesson I would never forget.

When Nick Kozak left the territory after losing a "Loser Leave Town" match to the Good Doctor [Dick Dunn] on April 1, 1969, Eddie paired me with Ciclon Negro, and we picked up right where Nick and I had left off … wrestling the Medics. During our program with the masked pair, Eddie came up the idea of having the Medics and the Good Doctor catch me alone in the ring, tie me up in the ring ropes, and cut my hair. I thought it was a great idea. My hair was fairly long for those times. It helped with my babyface image and helped get me over with the younger fans.

We kicked off the angle on television on April 17. During the program, the Good Doctor cut a promo and said, "All college boys should have a crew cut." I came out later and said I would wrestle both Medics in a tag-team match and would pin one of the two within of ten minutes. When the Medics were disqualified for refusing to obey the rules of tagging in and out, the Good Doctor rushed to the ring a pair of scissors. I turned the tables by ripping off his

mask, taking the scissors away from him, and cutting his hair. People who saw it tell me they can still hear the color commentator, Gordon Solie, excitedly announcing, "It's Dick Dunn! The Good Doctor is Dick Dunn!"

Two weeks later on television, I wrestled Eduardo Perez. When I pinned Perez, the three heels hit the ring, tied me up in the ring ropes, and cut my hair. The crowd went ballistic. We thought a riot was going to break out. Only the police, who were working as security that afternoon, kept the Medics from being the victims of a lynching. The angle brought a lot of heat from the fans and the sympathy I drew helped me get over even more than I already was. I may have lost my hair, but I won the crowd.

The following week, I gained a measure of revenge when I wrestled one of the Medics and "injured" him in the process.

The haircut angle went over even better than we

had thought it would. It became the most talked-about angle for years. Removing the Good Doctor's mask on television before cutting my hair was Eddie's idea. In most cases, masked wrestlers were unmasked on the house shows so the fans who bought tickets could witness the event. Unmasking someone on television was a stroke of genius because, even though less than 30 people were there to witness it live, thousands of people saw it on television when it aired two days later. The excitement of that angle, in turn, translated into increased ticket sales at the box office in all the towns in the territory.

The reason Eddie included the angle of the Medic being injured was to give himself time to circulate the haircut tape on television throughout the territory. While that was happening, Jack Brisco disappeared and another masked wrestler appeared on the scene — one who used the figure four leglock to win his matches. To the fans, however, there really wasn't any mystery as to who the new masked man was. They all knew it

was me beneath the mask. I wore the Good Doctor's mask, not only to show off the trophy I had won, but to cover my head until everyone was aware of the evil deed that had befallen me.

That was the first and only time I wore a mask, or "hood" in wrestling vernacular. Two things happened when I wore the mask. It inspired me to finish my matches in quick order and it gave me a new respect for those in the business who wore a mask as part of their character. Men like Tim Woods [Mr. Wrestling], Mil Mascaras, Dick Beyer [The Destroyer], the Medics, the Infernos, Johnny Walker [Mr. Wrestling #2], and many others had to be in tremendous shape to be able to wrestle the long matches they did, and the heat of the ring lights added to the extreme physical exertion. I tip my hat to them all.

The masks were made of nylon with soft plastic reinforcement around the eyes, nose, and mouth. It fit close to the contours of my face and was tied behind the head with a drawstring. In most cases,

we wrestled in buildings with no air conditioning, so you can only imagine how hot it was under that mask.

The angle was going through the roof, but I hated wearing the mask. Not only was it hot, but wearing it made it hard to see and I had no peripheral vision. Fortunately for me, however, the tape of the Medics cutting my hair circulated around the territory quickly and I was able to remove the mask. Sporting a new crew-cut, I wrestled the Good Doctor in every town in the territory, including the Bahamas. On May 29, I teamed with Ciclon to take on the Medics on television.

Being involved in an angle like that, or any well-thought angle that gets over in a big way, is more than worth its weight in gold. The haircut angle was so strong that we were able to draw fans without a championship being involved. I didn't need a title belt. The hair (or lack of it) and the mask really drew the interest of the general

public. It was a matter of honor. And matters of honor always do well at the box office.

In late 1969, I spent the better part of three months in Australia. When I returned in December, Eddie talked to me about giving me a run with the Florida heavyweight title. At the same time, I had another offer from my mentor, Joe Scarpa. He had finished his run in Florida and had worked out a deal to work for another promoter. Joe was concerned that Eddie wasn't going to utilize me to the level he thought I should be. He also was still angry about what Louie Tillet had done to me in Miami, so he tried to persuade me to join him as a tag team. We would have made a great team. Joe was the veteran and I was the kid; the young meat. I would get all the heat or sympathy as opponents worked me over, and Joe would come in to save the day and get the glory. I know that sounds like it adheres to some sort of formula. That's because it does. It's a program every promoter had used at one time or another, and they all used it because it

worked. Good versus evil, wrestling is a morality play at its best ... a morality play with muscles. Joe and I went so far as to have promotional pictures made, but after giving it some thought (not to mention the lure of the Florida title), I told Joe I wanted to stay in Florida for awhile and see how things played out. Joe wished me well and left for the Carolinas.

I was like a racehorse whose gate wouldn't open. I had been in the business for nearly four years and I was at my peak. I had beefed up to 220 pounds and was eager to move up the ladder. It had taken me a long time to feel comfortable in the ring and wrestle as naturally as I did on the amateur mat, ,but the early days I spent working for Fritz had helped get my mind right for working on top. By that, I mean I had developed self-confidence and an understanding of ring psychology. I learned how to control the action in the ring and the emotions of the fans. By the time I got to Florida, I was ready to get out of the openers and make my move for the top.

Eddie was willing to give me the opportunity, but there was one piece missing. That missing piece was a finisher. A finisher, or a finishing move, was the signature of a wrestler. It was what set him apart from the preliminary boys and the jobbers (the guys who were fodder for the top guys in television matches, or to round out a live card). They don't win often, if at all, so they really don't need a finisher. God knows, I didn't for quite some time. On the occasions when I did, I usually reverted to my amateur days and used a variation of the cradle, or the guillotine hit from a standing position that Danny Hodge taught me.

One day in January 1970, Eddie was talking to me in the narrow hallway outside his office in the Sportatorium in Tallahassee. When Eddie asked me what my finishing hold was, I told him I really didn't have one. "If you're going to get over here, you must have a move fans can identify with you," Eddie explained. "I think I have just the one."

I was on my way to the ring when Eddie showed

me the move he had in mind for me. He had the two of us sit on the floor and interlaced his legs around mine. "This is the figure four leglock." The figure-four was one of the most painful submission holds ever devised. "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers, the legendary NWA world heavyweight champion of the 1960s, brought the hold to the level of fame it received.

As the story goes, Buddy had been working out with another outstanding wrestler, Billy Darnell. During a break, Buddy was sitting in a corner of the ring with his legs crossed in a figure-four position. Fooling around, Billy jumped on Buddy's legs. According to Buddy, he nearly passed out with pain. Always the innovator, Buddy and Billy experimented with the hold that day, and the figure-four grapevine, as it was known then, was born.

One of the most important things about a signature hold was, it has to be almost exclusively used by one wrestler in a territory, or otherwise, it became

just another hold, like a headlock or a toe-hold. Nobody in Florida had used it for a long time and Eddie thought it would match my style in the ring. He demonstrated the procedure of applying the hold two or three times before I locked it in correctly. A few minutes later, I had it locked on the reigning Florida heavyweight champion, Mr. Saito. It was the first time Saito and I had wrestled on TV and it was one of the biggest upsets ever seen on the Florida Championship Wrestling television show. Saito put me over to set up a series of matches that would culminate in my winning the Florida title. Eddie had promised to put me over and he was as good as his word. He matched me with Saito throughout the state and we drew well.

Chapter 15
Chasing the Heels

Even though Eddie gave me a win over the Florida champion on his highly-rated TV program, he wasn't about to put the belt on me right away. He wanted to see how well I got over and how well Saito and I worked together. Graham, as I said earlier, was a promotional genius. He wouldn't just tell you how to finish a match. He would sit down in the dressing room with you and your opponent and take some of your ideas, some of your opponent's ideas, and add some of his own. Through this process, he would develop a fantastic five-minute finish to the match. Compared to today's matches, which generally don't last more than five minutes, that may seem like a long time, but it worked like a charm. It was amazing how he could put together a match. He also was a genius when it came to putting together the right combination of wrestlers

to create feuds that would last for months.

I enjoyed working with Saito. He got his start as a professional about the same time I did. His first name was Masanori, but I don't think he ever used it in the ring. It was always Saito, or Mr. Saito. He had quite an amateur record in Japan and had represented his country in the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. Standing six feet tall and weighing 250 pounds, he was a good worker and a great heel to play to my babyface role.

After a few weeks of me chasing after the title, and falling short due to Saito's cunning ring tactics, Saito put me over on February 10 in Tampa. The card that night, held in conjunction with Tampa's annual Gasparilla Pirate Festival, was billed as the "Big Gasparilla Spectacular" and featured eight title matches. The crowd was almost out of control when they raised my hand and handed me the belt. Thanks to Eddie, I had become a fan favorite, and they were thrilled to have a young, clean-cut wrestler as their champion. If it wasn't

for the off-duty police working there as security guards, I may not have made it safely to the dressing room. As much as you love them, the fans could be as dangerous to a good guy as they were to a heel. I could visualize the headlines: "New Florida Heavyweight Champ Beaten to Death by Cheering Fans."

I must say the belt was nicer than the one LeRoy used in Oklahoma. Most promoters didn't invest much money into the title belts, but that belt wasn't bad. It had an eagle in the center with two wresters on either side. At the edge of the faceplate were two palm trees, which symbolized Florida, I guess. Along the top, it read, "Florida Heavyweight Wrestling Champion." It really didn't matter what it looked like, though. I was proud of it, and I was thankful to Eddie for giving me the chance.

There are basically two types of wrestlers who enter the ring. I'm not talking about the heroes and villains here, but about the boys who understood

the business and were willing to put someone else over for the good of the territory and the fans (and you reciprocate in return), and the ones who were in it only to build themselves a reputation and preen around as prima donnas. The ones who were willing to do jobs to make the territory prosper usually did well, no matter where they wrestled. Those in it for themselves may have had a short run here or there, but more times than not, wound up in the curtain-jerkers and moving from territory to territory a lot.

Saito was in the former group. He didn't hesitate to put me over. I did the same for him not long after. It was all part of the business. As a result, Saito did well everywhere he went. With Kinji Shibuya as his partner, he held the Los Angeles-based NWA Americas tag team title three times, and with Mr. Fuji [Harry Fujiwara], he held the WWF world tag team title twice.

I held the belt for ten months before finally losing it to Tarzan Tyler [Lauren Tourville] in Tampa on

December 15. We wrestled in a two-out-of-three-fall match with a one-hour time limit and Leo Garibaldi as the special referee. I took the first fall, but Tyler won the match when I was "injured" during the second fall and couldn't continue.

Eddie believed it was better for business to have a heel hold the title most of the time. When a babyface would win it, they wouldn't hold it long. The reasoning behind his thinking was that the fans would more than likely come out in greater numbers to see their hero, be it me or someone else, try to take the title from some "evil" competitor, than to see a babyface defend his laurels against an opponent who will stop at nothing to win the title. I agreed with his thinking and he used that formula for years to keep the arenas full and his coffers overflowing. Once again, Eddie was successful by using good, sound business principles.

Most promoters used heels as their champions with great success. One who took another path and

did it to great lengths was Vince McMahon Sr. Vince followed his father Jess in the promoting business that harkened back to the legendary "Gold Dust Trio" of the 1920s in New York and throughout the northeast. Vince founded the World Wide Wrestling Federation in 1963 after he lost control of the NWA title when Buddy Rogers lost the title to Lou Thesz in Toronto. He, along with the other promoters in the Northeast territory, claimed Rogers lost the title in a one-fall match, whereas most title bouts during that time were two out of three falls. Not surprisingly, however, they ignored the fact that Lou won a best-out-of-three-falls rematch a few weeks later.

Buddy was only a transitional champion for Vince. Vince was in need of a new direction and a new champion. He found that champion in the person of Italian strongman, Bruno Sammartino. From Abruzzo, Italy, Bruno immigrated to the United States as a young man and settled in Pittsburgh. He took up bodybuilding and began wrestling to earn a living. In 1963, he

defeated Buddy in a scant 48 seconds to take the newly-created WWWF title.

The amazing thing was that Bruno had a run with the title of more than eight years before he lost the title to Ivan Koloff on January 18, 1971 in Madison Square Garden. Only Lou Thesz held a world title for a longer period of time during a single reign as champion.

The New York territory was different from that found in any other territory in the nation. You couldn't get into the territory unless you had an ethnic background of Italian, Greek, Puerto Rican, or the like. That fact had nothing to do with prejudice of any sort. The population of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and other northern cities was composed predominantly of families whose ancestors left their homes in other countries for America and settled in the northeast. They were good, honest, working men and women who would root for Bruno as he turned back, night after night, the vile challenges of whoever would try to

knock him off his throne. Vince knew what he was doing then, just as his son does now.

I did have a couple of opportunities to wrestle in New York. The first time I made an appearance in Madison Square Garden was September 14, 1970 and I wrestled Joe Turco. The following week, Eddie and I wrestled Johnny Rodz and Carlos Peredes. I couldn't believe how big the Garden was and the fact that the building was round. I also was impressed that the dressing rooms (which were huge) were located all the way up on the fifth floor. I remember walking in and thinking they were as big as some of the high-school gyms in which we had wrestled.

One of the most unusual matches I had was against Tarzan Tyler. The first time I saw Tarzan, I had never seen anyone as muscular as he was. He was cut from head to toe. Tarzan and I had a good program going after he beat me for the Florida title. To build up the program, he also beat me in the finals of a tournament for the newly-

created Florida TV title on October 29, 1970, which gave him possession of both titles.

The TV title was created to give the fans who couldn't get to the matches in person a chance to see a title defended on television, as well as another title to draw at the box office. The title was handled differently than any of the others. Every time the champion wrestled on TV, the title was on the line. When the title was defended on house matches, it was only up for grabs during the first ten minutes. Should the champion lose the match past the 10-minute mark, the challenger would get the win, but not the title.

I took the TV title from Tarzan in a rematch in Tampa on November 27. By January 1971, our feud reaching its peak, so Eddie thought the next logical step would be for us to wrestle with both titles on the line. My TV title would be on the line during the first fall and Tyler's Florida heavyweight title would be up for grabs in the final two. Conceivably, I would have to win all three

falls to take both belts home. Tyler would only have to win two (the first and one other) to have both straps.

The match took place in Tampa on January 19, 1971. Tyler won the first fall to capture the TV title. With my back against the wall and no title to defend, I found myself in the role of challenger. I would have to win the remaining two falls to win the Florida title. Since the title was on the line in a two-out-of-three-falls match, all Tyler had to do was win one fall to maintain his claim to the title.

I took the second fall with the figure four. The effects of the figure four left him in no condition to continue, so he forfeited the third fall, along with the Florida title. Talk about excitement. We had given the fans the type of action they were there to see and they saw two title changes in one match. The WWE did something like that when they featured a championship they called the hardcore title, which was on the line 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In just one night, at

WrestleMania 8, the title changed hands eight times. In the '70s, however, having two titles change hands in one match was a rare occurrence.

Like Vince McMahon Sr., Eddie also made exceptions to the rule of having a heel as a champion, but not often. And, like Bruno Sammartino, I was one of those exceptions.

At different times during the years 1969 through 1972, I held all the major singles titles in the territory: the Florida heavyweight, the Southern heavyweight, the Florida TV, and the Florida brass knuckles titles. After winning the Florida title from Tyler, I held onto it for the next sixteen months.

Between working programs defending those titles and, at the same time, challenging for Junior's world title, I was pretty busy. Under Eddie's direction, the Florida territory was the hottest thing going in the country, and there were plenty of wrestlers who wanted to be a part of it. Business

continued to boom. Dick Murdoch and I wrestled each other three weeks in a row in Tampa and sold out the Armory all three nights. If that wasn't heaven, it had to be close.

As the Florida heavyweight champion, I was considered to be the number one contender for the NWA world heavyweight title. To keep me over and make me look like Dory Jr. was avoiding me, Eddie brought in Dory's brother, Terry, for a few months. He came in under a mask as the Texan in March, but it was one of those situations where the fans were well aware of the identity of the person under the mask. In less than one week, he was wrestling without the mask.

I hadn't seen Terry since I had left the Amarillo territory. He was as wild and as likeable as ever. Now that his brother was the champion, Terry's career took off because he had a new role to play. Being the younger brother of the champion didn't put him in the driver's seat. That was reserved for the man with the crown ... but it did

allow him to ride shotgun.

It looked like I was getting too close to lifting the belt from Dory, so the Funks put a price on my head, offering $5,000 to anyone who could put me out of wrestling, just like we read in the stories from the Old West. When no wrestler was able to accomplish that feat, the Funks would go after me themselves. Terry would come in for the express purpose of either defeating me, thus putting me out of championship contention, or to injure me so I couldn't wrestle Junior for the title.

The program with Terry went surprisingly well. Working with Terry was different during this go-around. Florida was my stomping grounds, so I had the most clout. He was in a territory where I was the champion. It may have been only a regional title, but to the good folks in Florida, it was just as important as the one Dory wore around his waist. It wasn't Texas, so Terry was putting me over, as I had done for him a few years earlier in Amarillo ... but there was a distinct difference in

the matches we had. They lasted a lot longer. I gave Terry a hard time about it by reminding him of our early years together when I was working for his father. Now he was putting me over, but not in two minutes. I enjoyed working with Terry this time around. We laughed and reminisced about the day he totaled the two cars. It was a lot funnier now that so much time had passed, but I still refused to ride with him.

Dory and I met in the ring more times than I can remember. I'm sure it was more than a hundred. Having a babyface champion work a program with a babyface challenger was a different slant on the way things had always been done. The fans loved it and so did we. If given a choice, I would have worked with Dory every night. The matches were so smooth and mostly scientific. There were times when Dory would purposely get disqualified in order to keep his title [a title couldn't change hands on a disqualification], or I would hit the referee out of frustration when Dory constantly got away with

questionable tactics. At other times, we both would get disqualified after 45 minutes of going toe-to-toe and matching hold for hold. As Junior's title run progressed, we would work 60- or 90-minute draws. If things began to lag a bit in the program, I would pin him in a non-title match, and we would be off and running again.

During that time, Championship Wrestling from Florida with Gordon Solie was being aired in many other parts of the country, and it was extremely popular wherever it aired. In fact, the program on most stations garnered higher ratings than the local promotion's show. Television is the life blood of a promotion. The local promoter normally offered the show to television stations in their area at no charge. The station sold the commercial time and generated revenue without any expense, while the promotion reaped the benefit of having the vehicle it needed to sell tickets to their live events. Everybody won.

If a rival promotion from one territory shipped

tapes to stations in another, and had higher ratings than the local wrestling promotion, then the stations found it easier to sell commercial time for the show with the higher number of viewers. It many cases, it was Championship Wrestling from Florida. The fans loved it, but the local, established promoters didn't. It was a harbinger of things to come in the wrestling industry, in which I would find myself an active participant in the years ahead.

One of the markets that aired our tapes was Charlotte. Unbeknownst to Dory and me, the Charlotte fans had been following our matches for some time. When Dory and I were booked in Charlotte for Jim Crockett Sr., we knew our program was getting over. I had never wrestled in Charlotte and I don't think Junior had, either. The first time we wrestled there — March 9, 1970 — we sold out the Charlotte Coliseum. People were lined up around the block to see me challenge Dory for his title. We didn't have the advantage of a big television buildup with interviews like we did in

Florida, but there wasn't an empty seat in the house. We wrestled a one-hour broadway. Dory took the first fall with his suplex and I evened up the match with my figure four leglock. The third fall went the time limit. Our match was covered by most of the magazines. Wrestling Revue, the leading magazine at the time, featured us on the cover showing me with an armlock on Dory. The headline on the cover read: "Brisco-Funk: Class vs. Class." Not a bad way to start the year. It was considered such a success that Jim Crockett brought us back to Charlotte on June 29.

St. Louis also aired the Florida TV program, so Sam Muchnick brought the match to the Kiel Auditorium on January 1, 1971. The same thing happened there as it had in Charlotte. Tickets for the match sold out within hours of the announcement. We drew so well that we took our match into Texas, Charlotte, Puerto Rico, and other territories, as well as Japan and other countries.

We did broadways everywhere. I enjoyed doing

long broadways five or six times a week. It gave us the opportunity to build up the story of the match and work the crowd. I was 31 years old and Dory was 32; long matches were our specialty. As the years went by, six or seven matches a week (sometimes more) began to take its toll on our bodies and it became a little more difficult.

The best match I had with Dory, and the one which garnered the most attention, took place in the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg on June 19, 1971. The match was so high-profile that the posters advertising the match featured only Dory and me for the world heavyweight championship, and, at the bottom of the poster, "PLUS AN ALL-STAR LINEUP OF TOP TV WRESTLING STARS." Back then, depending on the town, general admission price were $2 to $2.50, with ringside seats going for $2.50 to $4. Such interest from the fans certainly didn't escape the watchful eye and financial wisdom of Eddie Graham. This was the golden goose and Eddie was going to take every advantage he could. As the old saying goes,

"Make hay while the sun shines."

Eddie came up with a plan to bump ringside tickets to $10, and general admission eight, six, and four dollars, for the match in the Bayfront. That was a 150-percent increase in the ticket prices from the "Big Christmas Spectacular" at the Bayfront the previous year. Everyone thought he was crazy; one too many body slams, I guess. P.T. Barnum on his best day wouldn't have done it, but Eddie did. Charging prices like that was unheard of in the wrestling business back then, but unchartered waters never fazed Eddie. He reveled in them. We all thought nobody would show ... but we couldn't have been more wrong. He began promoting our upcoming match with the inflated ticket prices weeks before it was scheduled to take place. In all his years in the promotional end of the business, he had never promoted a match like he did that one. The Bayfront Center sold out all 7,525 tickets in three days. The acting manager of the Bayfront Center said they turned away about a thousand fans, while

Jerry Prater (office publicist and photographer) estimated it at 2,000. The gate for the night was $41,000, another unheard of feat for wrestling at that time.

That night, Dory and I wrestled to another one-hour draw. I think many of the fans must have thought, with ticket prices that high, there was a good chance they would see me finally win the title. I was sorry to disappoint them, but they got one hell of a show for the price of their admission.

Funny thing about the payoff that night ... even with a full house and a record box office, our pay envelopes weren't any heavier. Eddie thought it had been all his idea, so the money was all his. The boys disagreed about the split and I went to Eddie to try to negotiate a better payday. The conversation didn't last long. He told me in no uncertain terms, "I don't care what everyone thinks. That's the way it is. I'm the boss and you all work for me."

Well, so much for that. I learned one very important thing that night. It made me realize all the more who really made the money in wrestling. It certainly wasn't the boys. Not even the champion pulled in what a good promoter did. As a result, I began to devise a plan to buy into the territory. Why not be part owner and top card at the same time? The money would be at least double, maybe more. I would have the opportunity to do that later on, but little did I know how my decision would change the way the wrestling business was run.

Next to Dory, one of my favorite opponents during my years in Florida was Tim Woods. Tim had a tremendous run in every territory in which he wrestled. He gained his fame as the white-masked Mr. Wrestling. Tim came up with the idea for the Mr. Wrestling character when he was wrestling for Joe Dusek and Verne Gagne in the Omaha territory. He began his pro career in New York and traveled around the country, working mostly in preliminary matches. He had the skills to rise

through the ranks to the main event, but wrestlers with his clean-cut collegiate appearance and scientific style were more than a dime a dozen. So, he donned white trunks, white boots, and a white mask, and became the mysterious Mr. Wrestling.

Tim was the first babyface wrestler in America to wear a mask. Mexico, of course, had El Santo, Mil Mascaras, the Blue Demon, and others. They were known as much for their appearances in movies as they were in the ring, but Tim's character was very different. Tim not only brought Mr. Wrestling to the ring, but he also displayed moves he learned as a top-flight amateur wrestler. As Mr. Wrestling, his career took off, beginning with his taking of the Omaha version of the AWA world title from Mad Dog Vachon.

If there ever was a wrestling prodigy, Tim was it. Growing up in Ithaca, New York, he began wrestling at the age of eleven. As a senior in high school, he placed fifth in the national senior AAU

tournament, which was an amazing feat considering he was wrestling against the best collegiate wrestlers in our nation. In 1952, Tim wrestled Dick Beyer in the finals of the AAU senior wrestling regional championships held in Buffalo, New York. He lost to Beyer in the 160-1/2-pound championship that day. Not bad for a senior at Ithaca High School who was facing a college senior from Syracuse University. Dick went on to gain his own fame as an amateur and later held versions of the world title as the Sensational, Intelligent Destroyer and Dr. X. Another interesting note from that tournament is that the winner of the heavyweight division was another future professional wrestling star, Don Beitelman, who wrestled as Don Curtis. Wrestling, both amateur and professional, is a small fraternity at best, and that tournament alone proves the point well.

In 1955, wrestling out of Cornell University, he won the 191-pound AAU National championship and was voted the outstanding wrestler in the

nation. Tim transferred to Michigan State, where he won two Big Ten titles, placed second twice in the NCAA championships, and won two AAU National championships. His travels on the mat brought him into contact with some of the world's finest amateurs — men like Shelby Wilson, Doug Blubaugh, Gary Kurdelmeier, Takashi Hirata, Terry McCann, and Bill Kerslake, to name a few.

Tim's pinning record was phenomenal, too. During his two years at Michigan State, Tim went 22-2-0 with seventeen pins for a pinning percentage of 91.7 percent. If there was a perfect man for me to begin a new program with, it was Tim.

Tim arrived in Florida in August 1971. Up to that time, he had always worked babyface, so Eddie came up with a different angle. Mr. Wrestling wasn't going to be a heel in the traditional sense. He would fall somewhere in-between. When he first came into the territory, he touted his amateur background and claimed he

came to Florida because that was where the action was. As in life, you are known by the company you keep, and to allude to the less-than-virtuous tactics used by Mr. Wrestling, he teamed with heels Dick Murdoch and Bobby Duncum.

On an early televised interview, Tim said one of the reasons he came to Florida was to lift the state title from around my waist. He built the heat between us by explaining why he was the superior wrestler, and that he wasn't there solely to win the regional honors, but to position himself as the number one contender for the world heavyweight championship.

In one interview, he stated, "I must, therefore, be about the business of proving beyond doubt that I am Jack Brisco's master in the wrestling ring. I must capture any title he holds, defeat him decisively in any kind of match he wishes, and otherwise erase every doubt that I am the top contender for the world title, and not Jack Brisco. Brisco's volatile temper is one of the

things on which I will capitalize when I wrestle that man. When I go in the ring with Jack, he will be psyched out. He will not be at his best when he meets Mr. Wrestling, which is one reason why I will succeed in beating the man where others before me have failed. The other reason is that I am better than Jack Brisco. I am a little bigger, I have a little more experience, and I have a lot better self-control in the ring. This is why Jack Brisco is another good wrestler, while I am Mr. Wrestling. So, bear that thought in your mind, Jack, and you too, Dory Funk Jr. I mean business when I say call me Mr. Wrestling."

What a soliloquy and the prefect cue for me to walk on the set and tell him, "I'm not going to call you 'Mister' anything."

The stage was set, not only for our matches against each other, but the race to see who would be the first to get to Junior's world title. It's one thing to have a new contender come into my backyard and claim they will beat me and take my

title. It was quite another to have someone come in and claim they are better in the ring and would beat me for the top honor of the sport.

Eddie first booked us wrestling amateur matches on television with Coach John Heath from Sarasota as referee. We would be pretty evenly matched until, in the third period, when it looked like I was going to beat Tim, he threw an elbow and got disqualified. A brawl between us ensued and wrestlers cleared the dressing room to pull us apart. This set up the angle that lasted for several weeks. We worked the program with Tim as "Mr. Wrestling," until I finally unmasked him in Tampa, at which time we started over with him wrestling as Tim Woods.

Tim began wearing a knee brace in the ring to support an injury he said occurred during a match against me when I trapped him in the figure four and he refused to submit. Of course, he would play it up and use the brace to drop across an opponent's arm, leg, head, or any other body part

that may have been available. It also kept my figure four leglock from being effective.

On one occasion, Tim and I were working a television match for my southern heavyweight title. He was seemingly on his way to victory when I was able to lock the figure four on him. After 30 seconds or so, it was obvious to the crowd that it had little effect on him. I increased the pressure, but he eventually made it to the ropes to force me to relinquish the hold. Pulling him to his feet, I threw him over the top rope. I followed him to continue the battle on the floor and then rolled back into the ring and challenged him to return and face me again. I shot in with a low single on his left leg, the one on which the brace was on, and began to remove the brace. When the referee tried to force us apart, I pushed him out of the way, which resulted in my immediate disqualification.

During his promos, Tim made the most of the victory and the tape was shown all over the state

with his hand raised in victory. That also gave him the opportunity to boast that if I was supposed to be such a great wrestler and worthy champion, why hadn't I been able to beat him when he was less than 100 percent due to his knee injury. Then, to make matters worse, I resorted to illegal tactics and tried to further injure his knee when I realized I couldn't beat him. "Brisco, I was man enough to wrestle you with an injury. Be man enough to admit that I'm better than you are," Tim said in a post-match interview.

His comments continued to fuel the fire. We drew packed houses all over the state with various titles on the line. With the help of his knee brace, Tim defeated me for the Florida TV title on September 28, 1972.

I always looked forward to working with Tim. It was a pleasure to wrestle someone who could actually wrestle. We were honored by the International Wrestling Institute and Museum in Newton, Iowa, in 2001 as we were inducted as

part of the third class into the Lou Thesz/George Tragos Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame, along with old-timers Farmer Burns and William Muldoon. It was one of the highlights of my career to be chosen and to enter the hall at the same time as my dear friend, Tim, a great man who spent his post-ring years monitoring his various business interests and donating his time and celebrity to help advance numerous charitable causes.

Tim passed away suddenly on November 30, 2002 at the age of 68. It was the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Tim had spent a quiet afternoon with his brother, daughter, son-in-law, and four-year-old grandson. After walking them to their car and checking on his brother in the den, Tim was walking down the hall towards his bedroom when he suffered a major heart attack and died instantly.

He will be missed by all of us who were fortunate enough to know him, and by the thousands of fans he thrilled throughout the world. With the mask or without it, Tim will always be "Mr.

Wrestling."

Chapter 16
"Number One"

Another top draw in Florida during that time was Bobby Shane [Robert Schoenberger], the self proclaimed "King of Wrestling." Bobby began wrestling professionally in St. Louis when he was just a teenager and, by the time he was nineteen, he was wrestling around the country in main events. Like many of us, he was hooked on the sport the first time he saw a live match. He began to hang around Kiel Auditorium and talked his way into the job of taking the boys jackets and robes back to the dressing room when they entered the ring.

Bobby learned his wrestling skills at the feet of stars like Rip Hawk, Bobby Bruns, and former three-time world heavyweight champion, Wild Bill Longson. He did well as a babyface and billed himself as the "Wonder Boy" of wrestling. He had

a mind for the business like few others. He ate, drank, and slept wrestling. He was always thinking about new angles and gimmicks. He only stood five-foot-nine or so, and weighed about 200 pounds, but what he lacked in size, he more than compensated for in charisma.

On November 16, 1971, he turned heel during a match with Johnny Walker. Shortly afterwards, he began to call himself the "King of Wrestling," and he began to wear a crown to the ring and on television. When Bobby made the switch, I was the defending TV champion. He made it clear that the reason he came to the Sunshine State was to face and defeat "Jackie" Brisco. He even had his own version of my finisher, the figure four leglock, which he claimed was much superior to my own.

During television tapings, Eddie had him sit at the announcing desk with Gordon Solie as a guest commentator, where he wasted little time in proclaiming his advanced knowledge of wrestling. He would interrupt Gordon, correcting

him and pontificating throughout the show. During one of my television interviews, Shane interrupted me by walking onto the set and challenging me. "Let's just see who the true king of wrestling really is," he said. I told him he would have to wait in line. There were plenty of other wrestlers in Florida who had paid their dues and deserved a title shot before him.

For weeks after our confrontation, he continued to challenge me. He showed up at ringside with a video camera and taped all my matches. That, of course, would continually distract me and cause my opponents to gain the upper hand for a moment or two. As the angle progressed, I repeatedly warned Shane to stay away.

As the weeks passed, my distraction and frustration with Bobby grew. On December 16, 1971, I was defending the TV title against Ole Anderson. When Bobby stood up on the apron to film me, I relinquished my hold on Ole and rushed him. Shane jumped off the apron and ran around

the ring, with me in hot pursuit. Just as I was about to grab him, he pulled his valet, Sherri, in front of him. I was so preoccupied with Shane that I forgot the referee was tolling off the ten-count. The next thing I knew, the timekeeper had rung the bell and was raising Ole's hand in victory. He was the new TV champion by count-out. That was the scenario that brought Bobby and me into our program for the Florida heavyweight title.

Bobby won his share of titles during his run in Florida. A week after I lost the TV title to Ole Anderson via count-out, Bob Roop won the title from Ole and dropped it to Bobby two weeks later. He also won the Southern heavyweight championship on November 23, 1971 from George Gaiser and had a tremendous series of matches with Tim Woods afterwards.

On November 28, 1972 in Tampa, Bobby did manage to win the Florida title for a short period of time. At least, he thought he did. Bobby had been wearing a steel knee brace, much like the one

Mr. Wrestling wore, but he didn't wear it to prevent the devastation on his knee from my figure four. He used it to gain victory by grabbing the hair of his opponent and running his head into the brace. He used the gimmick on me, took the fall, and was handed the title. The decision was reversed when the referee discovered the brace under his tights and disqualified him.

I know I said it before, but it bears repeating; Shane had an unparalleled mind for the business. After winning the Florida TV title, he refused to wrestle on television, citing the fact that a champion of his caliber should not be wrestling on television where the "simple fans" of Florida could see him wrestle for free. If they wanted the "privilege" of seeing him wrestle, they were going to have to pay for it.

On March 2, 1972, he was ordered by Sam Muchnick, the president of the NWA, to defend the title against me. Bobby showed up and said he had the 24-hour flu, but he would allow Bearcat Wright

to take his place. After a few minutes, when I had Bearcat in trouble, Bobby interfered and the referee disqualified Bearcat. The NWA stripped Bobby of the title and put it up for grabs in a tournament that would determine a new champion. On April 18 in Tampa, "Number One' Paul Jones won the tournament.

A little more than one year later, after I won the world title, Shane claimed the championship for himself when he appeared on television and challenged me … on a night I was booked in another part of the country. When I didn't show, he claimed victory and sent out flyers stating he was the man who had defeated Jack Brisco (by forfeit).

If he had lived, I have no doubt that Bobby would have become one of the greatest bookers of all time, but his life ended far too early. He was traveling from Miami to Tampa on a small private single-engine Cessna 182 airplane piloted by Buddy Colt. Gary Hart and Mike McCord, who later became Austin Idol, were also on the plane.

They had left late on the night of February 20, 1975, from the Opa-locka Airport with plans to land at Tampa International Airport. Bad flying conditions forced Buddy to land at the Peter Knight Airport on nearby Davis Island. Buddy was unfamiliar with the landing area on Davis Island and came in too high to make the landing safely. As he banked the plane to make a second attempt, the plane's engine stalled and they crashed nose first into the bay.

Colt, Hart, and McCord all were able to free themselves and swim safely to shore. Bobby was not as fortunate. He couldn't unlatch his seat belt and he drowned in fifteen feet of water only 300 yards from the shore. He was dead at the age of 29.

The stories hit all the papers, radio and television stations by early the next morning. We all were shaken by the news. The following week in Tampa, while I was waiting backstage for my match to begin, the ring announcer announced that

Bobby Shane had been killed in a plane crash. We all were expecting, at the very least, a moment of silence. What we heard, however, was cheers and celebration from the crowd.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Those people were actually cheering about the death of someone they came to see week after week; the death of another human being. I was shocked. That memory haunted me for years, and it still does whenever I think back to that night. It was almost surreal. In a way, though, I wonder what Bobby would think. He sold his heel character so well that people actually hated him enough to applaud his death.

That was the only time I remember being ashamed that I was a professional wrestler. However, it does make me wonder. If Bobby had been able to hear the commotion that night, would a sly smile have slipped across his face?

I didn't lose the Florida heavyweight title to

Bobby, but I did to Paul Jones.

Paul's first exposure to the wrestling world was an unusual one. Originally from Port Arthur, Texas (home of another famous Texan, and Paul's one-time girlfriend, Janis Joplin), he was working as a cameraman on Morris Sigel's live wrestling show that aired every Saturday afternoon at five o'clock. Amateur wrestling was not all that popular in Port Arthur when Paul was growing up, so he didn't know a lot about the sport. He had wrestled a bit at the local YMCA and at the Boy's Club, but spent most of his athletic career boxing in the Golden Gloves. He was still in high school when he was working for Sigel, and not only did he work behind the camera, but he set up the ring. Morris and his ring announcer, Paul Boesch, approached Paul one day and encouraged him to try his skills in the ring.

Paul moved to Houston and trained for a couple of years before hitting the circuit. I knew Paul because I had met him on my trips through the

Carolinas and he roomed with Gerry for a while. When I finished my program in Florida with Tim, I really didn't have anything else going on. At the same time, Paul had just completed a tag team program with Nelson Royal and was waiting for Crockett to put him in another one. He and Nelson had been working on top in a program with Gene and Ole Anderson, trading the Mid-Atlantic tag team title back and forth. I called Paul and invited him to come to Florida after telling Eddie about him. Eddie had known about Paul and was interested in talking to him and adding him to the roster.

Paul arrived in Tampa on an unusually hot Sunday morning in early May 1972. He called me from the airport and told me he had just gotten in and he needed a ride. I asked him, "Paul, you didn't really believe me, did you? I was only ribbing you. Eddie never said anything about you coming in. I'm sorry. I thought you knew I was kidding."

Paul was furious. Of course, Eddie did want

Paul to wrestle in the territory, but it was such a great set up that I couldn't resist. I told Paul I'd pick him up and make him breakfast. "There is no way I am coming to have breakfast with you. I am turning around and taking the next plane back to Charlotte. Never, and I mean never, call me again," Paul screamed at me. I really didn't need the phone to hear him. I could have just stuck my head out the window and heard him just as well. Paul finally calmed down enough to let me pick him up and cook breakfast for him.

When I pulled up to the airport, there was Paul, sitting outside wearing a coat and tie and sweating like he was cutting weight. When I got out of the car to greet him, he refused to shake my hand and wasted no time in telling me what he thought of me and my sense of humor. I took him back to my apartment and cooked some bacon and eggs, still holding fast to my story of the rib. Paul sat at my kitchen table and sulked, never touching a bite. I said, "Paul, since you're here, why don't we go see Eddie, say hello, and see if he might have some

work for you."

"Hell no. I'm not going to go see Eddie Graham and beg for a job. He'll think I'm some kind of a mark and he won't hire me. I'm going home."

I did convince him to at least ride with me to the wrestling office and say hello. When we got to Eddie's house, he smartened Paul up pretty quickly. Eddie and I had a good laugh about it, but Paul didn't seem to think it was as funny as we did. Oh, well. Two out of three isn't bad.

Paul didn't hold it against me, though. I thought it would be a good idea for him to work as a heel. Paul didn't like the idea. He had never worked heel and he didn't believe he would be comfortable doing it. I told him he would make more money in a year wrestling as a heel than he had ever made in any year since he got into the business. I told him I was so sure of it that I would bet him a case of Canadian Club whiskey. He took the bet. One year later, he walked into the dressing

room and handed me a case of Canadian Club. I should have wagered more. After all, he could afford it.

Jones did well in the heel role. He got over in the territory like wildfire. Eddie wanted the two of us to work together around the territory and build up to him taking the Florida heavyweight title from me. I told Eddie I thought it would have a better impact if Paul beat me during our first go-around. It would establish him as a heel instantly and draw a lot of heat. Eddie agreed and booked a title match between us for May 16, 1972 in Tampa.

We worked a terrific match to a packed house. At the end of the match, when I had Paul trapped in the figure four, he crawled to the ropes, at which point the referee ordered me to break the hold. I released the figure four and Jones told the referee to push me back to give him room to get up. Losing my temper, I pushed the referee aside and charged at Paul. Paul, who was still lying in a corner of the ring, cocked his hand and caught me

in the throat with a vicious karate chop to the throat. That was an illegal maneuver, but the referee was lying on the mat and didn't see it. By the time he got up, Paul draped his body over me and the referee counted my shoulders down for the pinfall.

You could have heard a pin drop in the armory. I don't think anyone ever drew so much heat so quickly. After that match, Paul Jones began to call himself "Number One" Paul Jones. He would enter the ring with the Florida heavyweight belt and raise his fist in the air with his index finger extended; indicating number one to the thundering boos of the fans. Not a bad start for a guy who didn't want to work heel.

Jones was a great heel; arrogant and unbeatable. He scored wins over Johnny Walker, the Great Malenko, Tim Woods, Hiro Matsuda, and a non-title victory over Dory Funk Jr. in St. Petersburg.

Paul and I wrestled in matches with every type of stipulation conceivable — Texas death, two referees, brass knucks, lights out, karate allowed, amateur rules, fists vs. karate — but what wrestling fans remember the most about Paul had to do with the Florida TV title and for what he did on the Howard Franklin Bridge one Sunday afternoon.

I was chasing the Florida TV title around the state after Paul won the vacant title in a tournament by defeating Johnny Walker in the final. One month later, he replaced the inscription on the front of the trophy that said "TV Trophy" with one that said "Paul Jones TV Trophy," and began making statements on television about "retiring" the title. "I'm very, very disappointed today in the National Wrestling Alliance," he said. "I was going to retire [the trophy]. I actually intended to retire it, and I got a call at seven o'clock in the morning from Sam Muchnick — seven o'clock in the morning … a man doesn't even have privacy anymore — and he said I didn't beat Brisco from

the list of challengers he gave me."

Paul went on to say he would beat me in less than 20 minutes and then he would retire the trophy. The match took place in Tampa on May 30. I won the match, but it took longer than 20 minutes, so Paul retained his hold on the trophy.

On June 8, he appeared on television and said he was retiring the trophy. He went on to say, "I would like to present Jack with this trophy here and I ask merely one thing — and it's a minor thing to him, but a great possession to me — that Jack Brisco would keep this plaque on here and remember. That will give him the incentive, not only when he defends this or honors it, but also to defend the great Paul Jones TV trophy."

Paul then got into the ring, where I was preparing to wrestle Ronnie Garvin, and made the presentation. "Jack Brisco, I present you with one of the great possessions of the wrestling business. The Heisman trophy of wrestling. Jack

Brisco, this is all yours and keep it and honor it with all due faith. Thank you, Jack."

I stared at Paul and, at first, refused to accept it. I finally gave in and took the trophy … and proceeded to tear off the small figurines on the base of the trophy and smashed it to bits. With that, we were off and running. When Paul bent over to pick up the pieces, I attacked him and a wild brawl ensued with Ronnie Garvin, Bobby Shane, Mike Graham, and Eddie Graham all getting involved. During an interview after order was restored, Paul challenged me to another match. More matches and more money in the bank.

When the NWA refused Paul's demands to make me pay for the trophy, Paul decided to retaliate in kind. He said if I could do as I wished with the trophy, then he could do the same with the Florida title belt. On TV interviews during the weeks following the destruction of the TV trophy, Paul told people he planned to throw the belt into Tampa Bay. True to his word, on Sunday, July 16,

at five o'clock in the afternoon, Paul made an appearance on the Howard Franklin Bridge overlooking Tampa Bay.

Driving down Dale Mabry Highway to the bridge was about a 40-mile trip for Paul. As he got close to the bridge, he began to see cars and wrestling fans lining both sides of the highway. By the time he reached the bridge, the fans were actually in the street and blocking traffic as they ran down Dale Mabry. By the time Paul reached the middle of the bridge, the crowds blocked all traffic on both the Tampa and St. Petersburg sides. The bay was chock full of boats, most of whom had hopes of catching the belt as it fell to the water. Three helicopters flew overhead with news anchors on board to cover the event for the local TV and radio stations.

Paul got out of the car, walked to the side of the bridge, made a few comments, swung the belt over his head three times, and threw it into the bay. No lucky fans were able to retrieve it and, as far as I

know, it rests at the bottom of the bay to this day.

That one incident probably remains the most talked-about angle in Florida wrestling history. It was the lead story on the eleven o'clock news that night and people still talk about it. Paul, like Tim, helped breathe new life into an already-successful territory. But that was the challenge in the wrestling business; to keep coming up with new angles, stories, and talent to keep things fresh and the fans interested and excited.

The following week on television, after Gordon showed the tape of the incident, Paul walked onto the set with his new "Paul Jones Florida Television Trophy," which would ultimately go to Tim Woods in a September 28 tournament.

In the spring of 1973, I moved from Tampa to Atlanta. I hated to move away from Florida, but I was getting bookings all over the country, as well as Puerto Rico and Japan. It was difficult to fly to some of the towns from Florida and return home on

the same day. Atlanta afforded me the opportunity to cut my time on the road because nearly every major city in which I wrestled — St. Louis, Amarillo, Houston, Charlotte, Greensboro — could be traveled to in a few hours. I could even fly to Tampa and Miami in less than a couple of hours. Most of the larger towns also had late night flights to Atlanta, so I could take the "red-eye" back home the same night. It didn't take me long to memorize almost every flight number, as well as the times of departure and arrival, to destinations across the nation. That would be a skill which would prove to serve me well in the years to come.

Chapter 17
Walkout

Shortly after I arrived in Atlanta in November 1972, the wrestling territory was in upheaval. The once-strong territory run by Paul Jones (not to be confused with the Paul Jones I wrestled), Lester Welch, and Ray Gunkel (who had been a great amateur wrestler at Purdue University in the ‘40s), was on the verge of collapse. Paul Jones had wrestled throughout the south during the ‘30s and ‘40s and won the hearts of the fans as a top regional babyface. He was an amazingly intelligent man who had the Midas touch for any business he entered. During the ‘50s, he began to invest in real estate in the growing metropolis of Atlanta and became a multi-millionaire. He even lived in a beautiful penthouse that he gained as part of a business deal. He leased the land to a big hotel chain and, to sweeten the deal, negotiated the penthouse rent-free for life.

He never really was the promoter. He owned a large portion of the wrestling promotion with Welch, Fred Ward, and Gunkel, but he left most of the business decisions to his partners. Paul had been promoting wrestling in Atlanta for nearly 30 years with great success, holding his shows in the old Atlanta City Auditorium on Friday nights. He also helped supply talent to other territories in Florida, Alabama, and a few others, but it was Lester Welch, who ran things, along with Gunkel.

Together, the three of them formed the ABC Booking Company, and they all enjoyed the spoils of their successful venture. Gunkel's right-hand man at the time was Tom Renesto, who had just retired from the ring and was trying to move into the promotion end of the business. Tom wanted to buy into ABC Booking and Ray had promised he would do what he could to convince his partners to take him in as part-owner of the company.

On August 1, 1972, Ray died from heart failure on a Savannah, Georgia, dressing room floor after

a match with Ox Baker. His death ended any chance Renesto might have had of owning a piece of the territory. On the Monday after Ray's death, his widow, Ann, walked into his office and sat down at his desk. Ann was a beautiful woman in her mid-thirties. She was a former model and had done some managing of other fashion models. She was now a widow with two small children and a good percentage of a successful business. It wasn't long before she began to make moves to take over.

When she tried to rent the Atlanta City Auditorium to promote a show of her own, Jones and Welch confronted her and promised they would continue to do business with her as they had with her husband. They assured her that, as far as they were concerned, she still owned his stock and business would continue as usual.

Within a few days, Ann took 25 of Paul's wrestlers, along with Ed Capral, the TV commentator, and formed her own upstart, rival

promotion. Ann claimed she wanted to make changes in the business and that Paul and Lester refused to listen. The truth of the matter was that Ann wanted to take over everything. She wasn't satisfied with her 40 percent of the company. She wanted it all. As things turned out, she came close to getting it. Close … but her scheme didn't pan out in the end.

Paul was very business savvy. He quickly dissolved the ABC Booking Company and set up Mid-South Sports, Inc., to run against Ann's newly formed Gunkel Enterprises. The biggest problem facing Paul, initially, was the fact that the walkout Ann had led took place on a Thursday morning. That meant Paul and Lester had no wrestlers to work on their weekly Friday night card, which was a little more than 24 hours away. Paul and Lester, along with Eddie Graham, got on the phone and began calling every promoter with whom they had a friendly relationship. By Friday night, they had a full card featuring top wrestlers from around the country.

Promoters didn't hesitate to send their boys to bail out an old friend. When Paul told them he didn't have any money to pay them, they all told him one of two things: "You don't have to pay them. We'll see that they get paid," or "You don't have to give us anything. We are in this with you until the end."

Ann misjudged Paul's ingenuity and tenaciousness. She may have had Paul's old stable of familiar faces, but that is just what they were … the old faces. Mid-South now had the top talent; not only in the territory, but in the nation. Ann also made some other miscalculations. Jones' old promotion had a long-term contract with the television station in Atlanta. Therefore, he was able to keep the Saturday evening prime-time spot, as well as having use of the TV studio to tape their matches. Ann had to settle for taping her shows in other towns and having to air them after Paul's show on Saturday.

Ann didn't have a promoter's license to promote

shows within the city limits, so she had to hold them outside Atlanta in the field house at Oglethorpe University. She did eventually get a license to promote in Atlanta proper, but had to settle for a weaker Tuesday night show, compared to Mid-South's Friday card. The old saying "This town isn't big enough for both of us" rang true here. We all knew it was only a matter of time before one of the promotions had to fail, and we were determined it wasn't going to be Mid-South.

Ann also made a mistake in placing Tom Renesto as her head booker. Tom had been a tremendous worker, but his talents were in the ring, and not behind a desk. His matchmaking skills were weak and that wouldn't work too long with the fans. Just ask World Championship Wrestling [WCW] about that. Another problem she had was that Fred Ward had also jumped ship when the wrestlers staged their exodus. He had originally planned to go with Ann, but he had been friends with Eddie Graham for years, and Eddie convinced him to return to Paul's promotion. Fred held 20 percent of ABC

Booking, and when he left Ann, not only did he take his knowledge of the sport, he took his knowledge of the inner workings of Jones' office.

It was about that time that Paul and Lester approached me and offered me ten percent of Mid-South Sports. It was a match made in heaven because they needed the operating capital and I had been looking for an opportunity to buy into a promotion. I accepted their offer. At the time, it was ten percent of nothing. Little did I know that the purchase would help propel me into an entirely different realm of the wrestling business. However, I now not only had ten percent of nothing, but my investment cost me a lot of money early on in the venture.

Gunkel Enterprises didn't survive. In less than two years, Ann's promotion folded, but she had one plan she was going to unveil before she was through fighting Paul for control of wrestling in Atlanta. She sued Mid-South Sports, Inc., claiming we were running a monopoly, thus running her out

of business. It is still hard to believe she could convince a lawyer that the reason she couldn't make a go of her business was our promotion, and not her less-than-stellar attempt at promoting and running us out of business.

We decided to settle out of court and just pay her off. The case could have taken years to resolve. We were confident we would win, but we didn't want to have the attorneys take all our money in legal fees. It cost us about $500,000 to settle. It still makes me somewhat angry when I think about it, but that was just the nature of the business we had chosen. It was my first entrée into ownership … and it cost me a small fortune.

Chapter 18
The Conversation

The heavyweight championship of the world has, since the beginning of recorded sports history, remained the pinnacle of achievement in all of sports. There is something about one man rising to the top in the field of battle from between the ropes, in either boxing or wrestling, which gives him superiority beyond that of other sporting endeavors. The accomplishment of one individual over a wide field of others brings recognition far beyond the arena and the ring. There is no greater title than the heavyweight championship. This is just as true in wrestling as it is in boxing. It was the individual competition that first brought me to the mat and it was the quest for the world championship that brought me to the ring.

The history of the world heavyweight title is as colorful and varied as the men who have held

it. The belt has been held by farmers, shoemakers, dishwashers, football players, and collegiate champions. It has been held by Italians, Hungarians, Greeks, Irishmen, Native Americans, and a host of other nationalities. They may have come from different occupations and nationalities, but there was one common thread that ran through them all — they rank among the toughest men who have ever lived.

The incidents leading up to my winning the NWA world heavyweight title on July 20, 1973 began about six months earlier. The world title had always been my goal, just as it had been the goal of almost everyone who had stepped in the ring to earn a living. It was what I had dreamed of when I read about Lou Thesz, Dick Hutton, Pat O'Connor, and Buddy Rogers in the drugstore when I was growing up in Blackwell. It also was the reason I decided to turn professional when my Oklahoma State University eligibility ended.

The world title was the reason I endured all the

travel, lousy promoters, and even worse paydays. With the success I was having in my matches with Junior and other top contenders, not only in Florida, but across the country, I believed I would have a good shot at one day becoming the champion. I believed most of the promoters in the NWA thought so, too. I had worked for most of them and we got along well.

Dory Funk Jr. held the title for almost four years and the constant traveling and pressure of being champion was beginning to take its toll. He had quite a long run, second only in the NWA to Lou Thesz [six years and three months from 1949 to 1956]. During his reign, he had proved to be one of the greatest champions of all time. He worked hard and carried the title with a great amount of class and dignity, and drew record crowds everywhere he went. By 1972, however, Dory was tired and he wanted to spend more time with his family, so he was ready to drop the title.

As I would later learn, when you are on the road,

especially working the schedule the world champion has to adhere to, your family life suffers, so Dory wanted to spend more time at home. Senior also had said he was going to turn over the Amarillo territory to his sons when Junior lost the title, so Junior wanted the opportunity to work more closely with his father and brother in their promotion.

So, the NWA board of directors was beginning to open discussions about crowning a new champion. Thanks to Eddie Graham, I had a good chance to be the man they would consider for that spot.

Shortly after the New Year began, Eddie began talking to me about me taking the world title. "I need to know if you're interested," he said. That was one question I didn't have to take much time to think about. It was difficult to contain myself, but I tried to remain as cool and aloof as I could. My answer to Eddie was a resounding, "Yes."

"Are you sure?" he asked me. "This will be the most difficult thing you will ever undertake. You have the talent to carry the belt, but you have to be sure you're ready for the additional workload, the travel, and the million and one headaches that come along with being the world champion."

I assured him I was willing to do everything it would take to not only hold the title, but to carry it with the honor and high standards that had been set by my predecessors.

With that conversation, the wheel was set in motion for me to win the championship of the world. I have mentioned a number of times that wrestling was a business, equal to any other sport or entertainment business. At that time, the wrestling business had reached a level that only a few had even dared to dream of during the previous 30 years. If wrestling was a business, then the world championship made all other aspects of that business pale by comparison. It brought in millions of dollars to the National

Wrestling Alliance and its promoters, and the revenue for the champion increased exponentially.

The champion received ten percent of every gate from the cards on which he wrestled. The president of the NWA was in charge of booking the champion and providing the services of the world champion to members of the NWA for a certain number of dates during the year. That was one of the reasons the promoters paid their annual dues. If a promoter wanted the champion to appear in his territory, he had to call the president of the NWA and work out a time and date for his appearance. Theoretically, a card on which the world title was on the line would draw larger crowds and more money, whether or not "championship prices" prevailed. In more cases than not, most of the additional money ended up in the promoter's pocket and not in the hands of the wrestlers.

With all the time and money invested in the title, the board of directors took the selection of the

champion very seriously. It was the cornerstone of their livelihood. How the champion was chosen speaks to the heart of politics and money. There was almost as much log-rolling and deal-making every year in Las Vegas at the NWA promoter's meeting than in any smoke-filled room where a presidential candidate was picked.

However, no matter how much politicking went on, the final decision always came down to one thing … money. The promoters made their selections based on who they thought could draw at the gate and put money in their pockets. Not every part of choosing a new champion was mercenary, however. Some of the contingent revered the history and legacy of the title and wanted to preserve it as long as possible. To them, choosing the world champion was as important as choosing the new Pope.

The subject of "control" was another quality at the forefront of their consideration when choosing the man who would next carry the title. It wasn't

so much about the control of the title — they already had that — as it was control of the man who held it. The champions of the past weren't puppets. They wouldn't have risen to the heights they had by not having the independence and fortitude needed to be successful in the sport, but the promoters wanted to make sure they all could get along. They wanted to be sure the champion remained cognizant of who he worked for and that he would do the job as the company saw fit.

What made a lot of the NWA board nervous were the times when Lou Thesz, Dick Hutton, me, and a few others held the belt … because we could actually wrestle, as well as work a match. More than once, we all were approached to drop the title to someone who, on their best day, as Lou would say, "wouldn't know a wristlock from a wristwatch."

There was always some unscrupulous promoter somewhere who would try to convince us to lose the belt to someone who knew next to nothing

about actual "wrestling." Our response was always the same, "Hell, no. If you want it that badly, tell your guy to get in the ring and take it. We'll do it for real if you want."

Surprisingly enough, we never had any takers. The NWA world title was the highest honor our profession could bestow. I don't know of anyone who has had the opportunity to wear the heavyweight championship belt who didn't believe that, or act in a manner accordingly. We weren't going to let just anyone beat us and walk away with the title, $25,000 bond or not.

The board of directors of the National Wrestling Alliance was scheduled to meet in August 1972 for their annual convention in Las Vegas. The board at that time was comprised of Eddie Graham, Sam Muchnick, Nick Gulas, Bob Geigel, Dory Funk Sr., Mike LeBell, and Shohei Baba. Eddie attended not only as a director, but as an emissary on my behalf.

There was no question among them that Dory wanted out as champion, much to the dismay of the board. Junior had a phenomenal run with the title and he still drew well. The promoters liked him and he was everything a champion should be. He had personified the championship for three years and nobody wanted him off the throne. Nobody, that is, except Dory. There was no changing his mind, though, so their charge was clear; determine who the next world champion was going to be, how it was going to happen, and where it would take place.

My name wasn't the only one in contention for the title. The Funks, of course, wanted Terry in right away, but that would have been difficult to sell and to orchestrate. It just wouldn't have been plausible to have Terry beat his brother. Bob Geigel wanted the belt around the waist of Harley Race, who had been his top star in Kansas City for many years. Harley had been a big draw in the Midwest and held the Central States heavyweight title for a long time. Less than a month after the promoter's

convention, Harley also won the newly-created Missouri State heavyweight title in St. Louis by defeating Pak Song in the finals of a tournament.

Other than a few tours of Japan, Harley hadn't ventured far from the Kansas territory since March 1970, so his drawing power at that time was suspect. Surprisingly enough, it was Nick Gulas who brought up my name, and Eddie followed suit. In the end, the promoters decided I was the one they had chosen as their next champion.

When Eddie returned from the convention, he called me into his office and gave me the news that I would be the next world heavyweight champion. The match would be held in Houston at the beginning of March. That would give me time to establish myself stronger in other territories and to tie up any programs in which I was involved in Florida.

Houston was picked as the site for the title change for a number of reasons. Title changes in those

times were, more often than not, done on neutral ground. Dory won the belt in Tampa, far from his stomping grounds of West Texas. In later years, Terry would lose the NWA title to Harley in Toronto, a good distance away from their home territories of Texas and Kansas. Ric Flair won his first run as champion when he beat Dusty Rhodes at Memorial Hall in Kansas City, under the watchful eye of then NWA president Bob Geigel. Kansas City was half a country away from the Carolinas and Florida, where Ric and Dusty were headquartered, respectively. I hadn't wrestled in the Houston territory on a regular basis since my first year in the sport,, so I would much rather have had the title change take place in Florida, but that wasn't my decision to make.

The primary thought behind winning the title away from home was that it brought more credibility to the title if the challenger won it by having to travel to an unfamiliar territory. That was especially true if the title was to be won straight out without any question of a hometown

decision. It also served to build a gate for a city that may not be the strongest of wrestling venues, or, as it did in some cases, to repay a favor to a promoter.

Paul Boesch was chosen to promote the match in Houston. Paul had spent more than 50 years in every aspect of the sport. He first entered the ring in 1932 and retired from promoting in 1987. During those years, he wrestled, announced, served as matchmaker and publicist, refereed, and promoted. Above all, he was well respected by wrestlers and promoters alike. He also was known as one of the best payoff men in the business.

At that time, Houston wasn't a very good town for wrestling, so Paul booked me in Houston once or twice a month to build up the town and set the stage for my championship match. From February 9 on, I found myself in the main event whenever I wrestled in the Houston Coliseum.

An interesting thing about being in line for the championship was that I had to hit the road before I took the title and be booked in all the top towns for all the top promoters. I thought I would work the towns against the top talent and win every match to prove my worthiness as the number one contender, but just the opposite was true. I had to put over the top wrestlers in every territory. In the space of just a few weeks, I went from being the top contender in the world to the biggest job-guy in professional wrestling.

The promoters had a reason, however, for having me do jobs for their top stars. After I won the title and returned to their area as champion, they would have ready-made matches with the guys that had beaten me. A champion alone cannot be responsible for drawing a crowd to the arenas. The challenger has a large part in it, as well. If the fans believe the challenger has an even chance to defeat the world champion, they will come and pay top ticket prices. If they think the champion will more than likely take the measure of

the challenger, and leave the ring with the belt still in hand, they will probably stay at home. On the other hand, if the local challenger had recently defeated the man who then went on to win the world title, the fans would come to the arena in droves. The psychology of the plan was simple. If the local champion defeated me just a month or so before I became champion, and then I defeated the world champion, it was basic logic that the local star had a good chance to beat me again and bring the world title home. The promoters would video tape my match with the hometown hero, and when I returned with the title, they would air the tape of me being defeated prior to winning the title.

Houston was different since that would be where I would be winning the title. To ensure a sell-out crowd, Boesch put me over his top guys in matches that would culminate with my winning the title from Dory. My run there began on February 9 when Paul booked me against Johnny Valentine, with the winner of the match being awarded a match with Junior for the NWA title on March 2. I

was declared the winner of the match with Johnny by disqualification. It would have been bad business if I pinned Paul's top star, who was being promoted as unbeatable. (In the months to come, however, I did pin his other top stars. Bobby Duncum, Fritz Von Erich, Wahoo McDaniel, the Missouri Mauler, and Blackjack Mulligan all put me over cleanly.) The win over Valentine, even though it was by disqualification, set me up to challenge for and win the title from Dory Funk Jr. on May 2.

I knew very well the value of the championship. The prestige and earning power it held was on par with most of the major sports. Great sums of money could be made very quickly with the belt if it was handled correctly and the champion looked out for himself. The travel, the contacts, and the endless possibilities that would be available after I left the ring were all tied up in becoming the world heavyweight champion. Doing jobs beforehand was just part of the business plan; the rematches with the local

stars who had already defeated me was just a smart way of doing business and ensuring good payoffs on my return.

The well-thought out plans of the NWA promoters, however, would have to wait a little longer in order for me to reap the benefits of me losing nearly every night and my subsequent title defenses. That is, if I ever got the opportunity at all.

On February 28, I was just getting out of the shower after wrestling Ron Starr in Miami when Eddie walked into the dressing room and informed me that he had just received a call from Dory Funk Sr. My plans had been to fly to Houston the next day and take the title from Junior the following night. Senior told Eddie that Junior and Senior both had been injured in an accident on their ranch. Supposedly, they had been rounding up cattle and rolled the truck, dislocating Junior's right shoulder in the process. Eddie went on to explain that due to his accident, Dory wouldn't be

defending his title against me in Houston. In other words, all bets were off and I wouldn't be getting the belt. Not on that Friday night, anyway, and perhaps not at all. I couldn't believe it. All my training and all the jobs I had done to put other wrestlers over boiled down to nothing.

You have to admire how Funk Sr. played up the truck incident. The newspapers covered the story, and The Wrestler magazine did a five-page cover story with pictures of Dory in the hospital, claiming the truck accident did what his opponents couldn't do — put Junior in the hospital. I have to be honest; I didn't believe that story for a minute. I had enough dealings with Junior's old man to know that anytime he was involved, there was some game being played.

When it came down to who the best professional wrestler in the world was, it all came down to politics. Dory Sr. was bound and determined that his son was not going to drop his world title to me. I'm not sure if it was because he just didn't

like me, the fact that Junior beat me so many times in two minutes or less, my amateur background, or the fact that they were Texans and I was from Oklahoma.

I do know he didn't want Junior to lose to a babyface. Losing to a babyface would mean Junior lost to a better wrestler, so Senior wanted him to lose to a heel who would screw Junior out of the championship. That way, he could claim that, even though he no longer held the belt, Junior didn't lose it fairly. Eddie told me Senior was adamant about that and had been raising hell with all the promoters, telling them the only way Junior would lose the title was if he dropped it to Harley Race.

Dory never made it to Houston that night. I wasn't as fortunate. Even though my match with Dory had been canceled, I still had to honor my obligation to Paul Boesch. He said he received the news on February 28, the same day Eddie did. Paul had promoted the match as thoroughly as any match in which he had been involved. I was

trying to deal with my disappointment, but Paul also had a huge problem of his own. Who was he going to replace Dory with on Friday night on such short notice? He had to choose someone the fans would accept as a worthy substitute. He didn't want the fans to walk out before the main event because they were unhappy over the fact that the world champion wouldn't be wrestling.

Paul hadn't been in the sport for as long as he had without learning how to sell tickets. He didn't make any announcements or send out any press releases regarding the change in the main event until the very last minute. He wasn't about to take a chance that a single fan might change his mind and not show up. He was an honest man, however, and thought he had to inform the fans.

The headline in the sports section of the Houston Post on Sunday, February 23, 1973, read, "Brisco Tries for Funk's Title in Mat Feature." The following week, on Thursday, March 1, they ran the story, "Funk Hurt in Freak Accident; Von Erich

to be Replacement." The second article was carried on page six in section D. I'm sure a lot of fans didn't know about the change in the lineup when they entered the Sam Houston Coliseum the following night. Paul was banking on the fact that they would still come to see me, and once there, they wouldn't ask for a refund. I had to go. I had an obligation to both Paul and the fans, and I wasn't about to let them down, but my heart wasn't in it.

Regardless, the card went on as planned. When it came time for the main event, I walked to the ring first. There was nothing unusual about that as far as the fans were concerned. The challenger always strode to the ring first and waited along with the crowd for the champion to make his entrance. That ceremony is as old as the sport itself. The champion always entered last. Not only was it a courtesy, but it built up the drama as the best wrestler in the world finally appeared to an excited crowd.

As the fans anxiously waited for the world champion to walk out into the arena, Paul crawled through the ropes with a microphone in his hand. He announced to the crowd that Dory had injured his shoulder on his "Flying Mare" Ranch. Before Paul could finish, the fans began to catcall and jeer. That disdain, however, turned to cheers when he announced that Fritz Von Erich had agreed to substitute for Dory. That was a smart move on Paul's part. Even though Fritz was only wrestling part-time by then, Texas wrestling fans saw him as a superstar. Even though Fritz was revered in Texas, a large portion of the audience wanted their money back. However, if it had been anyone other than Fritz, the rest of the fans might have asked for their money back. Whether or not Boesch refunded the ticket price to those who asked is anyone's guess. My guess would be … probably not.

Poor Fritz. I thought he was going to pass out. He had been a heavy chain-smoker for years, and before we were ten minutes into the match, his

tongue was hanging out and he looked like he was turning purple. I beat him that night without expending a lot of effort. I wouldn't be doing any more jobs for Fritz. Those days were long gone.

It wasn't until much later that I became aware of all that was going on behind the scenes. Whatever the facts were, the outcome was that Dory's old man got his way. Junior had a miraculous recovery and a match between Dory Jr. and Harley was booked. Kansas City was chosen as the site because Senior and Bob Geigel were good friends. Geigel was promoting the Kansas City territory and that was Harley's hometown. They agreed to the terms, the deal was set, and the match was on. Dory flew into Kansas City and the two met in the main event on Thursday night, May 24.

Everything went as planned; Harley was the heel facing the hero and champion of the world. The brave champion rushed his convalescence and, according to the media, entered the ring before his shoulder was fully healed. In his book, Hey, Boy!

Where'd You Get Them Ears?, Boesch explained it this way:

"Brisco was never convinced that Funk had actually had an accident, nor that he had received any injuries. Yet Funk's condition was documented by doctor's reports. We kept the pressure on the NWA, but there was no indication that Dory was improving, recuperating, or even alive. Word from Funk Sr. indicated he could not, and would not, sign for the match. Brisco's accusation refused to accept the injury story. This caused Funk Sr. to ignore the edict of the NWA and sign Junior to risk his title against Harley Race in Kansas City under the promotional banner of Gust Karras."

"On May 24, Race was the man on the spot when history was made. He scored a win over Dory Jr. and took the NWA belt. Having a new champion to rule the NWA did nothing to mollify Brisco. He was still the number one challenger and he expected to be the new champion. It did nothing to

ease the tempest between the Funks and Brisco, either. Dory blamed his loss on a man who wasn't even in the building the night he lost the belt. That man was Brisco. Dory's contention was based on the fact that Brisco had hounded him into premature defense of his belt. 'My shoulder wasn't healed,' said Dory, 'but I had to shut Brisco up some way and it cost me the title.'"

Paul Boesch, Hey, Boy! Where'd You Get Them Ears? Minuteman Press: Houston, 2001; p. 273.

That was a great explanation as far as the promoter was concerned, but implausible at best. I can't imagine any time in my career when I could force the Funks into anything, especially making Dory enter the ring before he was ready to face the man who was going to take his title. As far as the fans thought, the title change came out of nowhere, but it all was Senior's doing.

Their match ended just as Senior had wanted. After splitting the first two falls, Junior

came off the top rope and had Harley covered for the win. In the process, Dory had knocked down the official, Richard Moody, who was too "stunned" to make the count. Dory had Harley pinned for far more than the required three seconds. Moody regained consciousness and started his count. Before his hand slapped the mat for the count of three, Race kicked out. Dory, angered by the ineptitude of the official, pushed Moody into the corner. While he was chastising him, he broke the cardinal rule of self defense; protect yourself at all times. Harley came up behind the champion, kicked him in the stomach, picked him up in his vertical suplex, and pinned him to take the third and final fall … and with it, the heavyweight championship of the world.

So there it was. Dory had what he wanted. He no longer was the champion and he could finally catch his breath. Even though Senior didn't want his son to drop the title, he was happy because Dory's reign ended with him in control. Junior lost to a heel, in the heel's hometown, and he was

screwed out of the title.

I had bigger problems than seeing my title aspirations go up in smoke. The tapes of me jobbing all over the country were being shown everywhere. That was in the day when losing in the ring actually meant something. I was ranked as the number one contender, but now I looked like a guy who had a great future behind him. I was left out in the wind to twist.

I was angry that I had been done in by Dory Funk Sr. again, and that I could do nothing more than just accept it. His friends controlled the title and, as far as I knew, I was out of the title picture. Fortunately, Eddie and his buddies were still in my corner and they were working hard to be sure my exile didn't last too long.

I was still wrestling in Florida and Boesch continued to bring me into Houston and put me over his top guys. He had the match that all promoters dreamed of —— a world heavyweight

championship match in which the title changed hands. It was the brass ring and he wasn't going to let it slip by him without getting it back. We all knew Harley was chosen to be an interim champion, but he would get another run with the title years later, but only after I had mine.

I wrestled Dory one more time before I won the title, and surprisingly enough, it took place in Houston. There was no title on the line that night; only our pride and a promise of the winner meeting Race for the title. We wrestled a two-out-of-three-falls match and Dory, to his credit, put me over, setting up my match with Harley for the world heavyweight championship.

Chapter 19
The Middleman

You can ask anyone who ever wrestled Harley Race and they would be lying if they told you they didn't think he was one of the toughest men who ever laced up a pair of boots. According to Harley, he first became interested in wrestling early in his teens by meeting and, subsequently, working for Stanislaus and Wladek Zbyszko on their farm near St. Joseph in northwest Missouri. The Zbyszko brothers were wrestling legends worldwide, long before Harley and I were born.

Stanislaus, the eldest and better known of the two, was not, by any means, your typical professional wrestler. Born Stanislaus Cyganiewicz in Pilsen, Poland in 1880, a man of letters as well as the ring, Stanislaus earned degrees in law, philosophy, and music at the University of Vienna in Austria

and spoke eleven languages fluently. Finding wrestling as fascinating as his studies, Stanislaus began wrestling as part of an athletic show in a traveling circus and turned pro after a short period of time, hoping to follow in the footsteps of his hero "The Russian Lion," George Hackenschmidt.

In 1906, he defeated Russia's number one wrestler, Ivan Podubny, for the World Greco-Roman wrestling championship and winning the European heavyweight championship in Belgium. After his victories in Europe, the five-foot-eight, 260-pound Zbyszko set sail for America in 1909, where upon arriving, claimed a winning streak of more than 900 straight victories. He promptly was booked for an exhibition match with world heavyweight champion Frank Gotch. The time limit expired with neither man securing a fall. A rematch was held on June 1, 1910, in Chicago with Gotch taking the match in straight falls. Gotch took the first fall in six seconds and the second in 27 minutes.

Undaunted, Zbyszko, returned to Europe and remained a force to be reckoned with on the mat throughout the world. Refusing to leave his homeland when the Bolshevik revolution broke out, he was imprisoned, and his land and fortune confiscated. While imprisoned, he was tortured and forced to wrestle the Greco-Roman world champion, Alex Aberg, in which the stipulation of the match was he had to win or forfeit his life. He defeated Aberg … twice. Upon being freed in 1920, with his possessions gone and his body weakened from years of imprisonment, Zbyszko set his sights on regaining what once had been his and winning the world heavyweight championship.

He returned to the United States in January 1920 and began a relentless campaign for the world title. Riding another undefeated streak in 1920 and 1921, Stanislaus faced Ed "Strangler" Lewis for the world heavyweight title on May 6, 1921, in Madison Square Garden. He defeated Lewis and realized his dream. No man had ever faced such adversity on his way to the title. His great faith

and will took him beyond his circumstances to the pinnacle of the sporting world. Almost a year later, he dropped the title back to Lewis, but would again hold the belt by defeating Lewis' next conqueror, Wayne "Big" Munn, on April 15, 1925. He held it for just a month before losing it to two-time former champion, Joe Stecher, in St. Louis.

Zbyszko continued his ring career and appeared in rings worldwide until 1940. In January 1929, he competed in what was probably his last great match when, at the age of 50, he wrestled the Great Gama, the legendary Indian grappler in Patiala, India, in front of 10,000 fans.

When he retired from the ring, Stanislaus began promoting matches and managing his brother Waldek's wrestling career. He discovered Antonino "Argentina" Rocca and had a major role in the training of Johnny Valentine. He and his beloved brother retired to their farm, where they raised hogs until his death in 1967 at the age of

88. He is one of the most amazing men to ever buckle the world heavyweight championship belt around his waist. It is no wonder that Nat Fleischer, boxing and wrestling historian and founder of The Ring magazine, rated Stanislaus Zbyszko as one of the top six wrestlers of all time; only Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt preceded him on the list.

That was the man with whom Harley Race cut his wrestling teeth. Turning pro at the age of sixteen, Race spent his time paying his dues in the ring and running errands for promoter Gust Karras. Harley moved on to Amarillo in the early '60s, where he worked for Funk Sr., and received his first big break while working for Verne Gagne in the Minneapolis territory. Teaming with fellow heel, the rugged Larry "The Axe" Hennig, father of the late "Mr. Perfect," Curt Hennig, he held the American Wrestling Association's version of the world tag team title on and off for five years or so.

After his run with Verne in the Midwest, Race

returned to the St. Louis-Kansas City area, where he ruled the roost and won every title available during the early ‘70s. Whether he called himself "Handsome" Harley Race, or bowed to the fans jeers of "Mad Dog" Race, Harley was making a name for himself. Although Harley only held the world title less than two months, he would come back again and again, winning the belt eight times, a record that lasted for many years.

I had worked with Harley a number of times before. We usually had good matches and our styles seemed to mesh well. He had been in the business for a long time and he knew the details of what had been going on with me and the title. To make things go smoothly for me, he came into Houston and "did the honors" by dropping the title to me without any fuss. The plan all along had been to put Harley in line to take the title after I had a run with the belt. When my 29-month reign ended, however, he had to wait another fourteen months because the NWA (no doubt at Funk Sr.’s urging) put the belt on Terry Funk. Race defeated

Terry in Toronto on February 6, 1977, thus giving him the distinction of being the man to win the title from both of the Funks, the only two brothers to hold the NWA world heavyweight title.

I arrived in Houston on the afternoon of July 20, 1973. Since I planned to return to Atlanta on the "red-eye" so I could be at the TV taping the next morning, I didn't get a hotel room. Thanks to Paul's promotion of my matches in Houston leading up to my match with Race, we had another sellout crowd. Boesch made sure the fans in the Houston area were kept aware of the impending title match by keeping the wrestling news in the forefront of the sports pages.

Wrestling fans in Houston learned of Junior's demise as champion on Sunday, May 27, when the Houston Post ran a story with the headline, "Dory Funk Loses Title in Kansas City; Race is Wrestling's New NWA Champ." On Friday, July 20, it featured the news, "Race Risks World Title Against Brisco Tonight."

The Sam Houston Coliseum was located downtown at 2022 San Jacinto at Gray. It was an old building with a small parking lot in the back for the wrestlers. There was a small stage at one end of the arena where we would tape interviews for upcoming matches in the area before we wrestled. The fans loved the live interviews and the promoters enjoyed hearing the fans' live reaction to what we said.

The advance ticket prices for that night were $2, $3.50, $4.50, and ringside at $5.50. Tickets at the door were 50 cents higher for each seat. There were a few preliminaries and two semi-finals before our main event. One of them featured Ivan Putski and Jose Lothario facing Blackjack Mulligan and the Missouri Mauler. Boesch even booked himself on the card as Paul "Mr. TV" Boesch took on "Playboy" Gary Hart.

The newspaper ad heralded our match as "The Year's Most Sensational Title Battle." I don't know if it was wrestling's most sensational title

battle of the year, but it most certainly was mine. Harley and I shared the same dressing room with the rest of the boys and had time to go over how we wanted the match to work before we went to the ring. The card began at 8:30 and it was a little after ten o'clock when I walked to the ring as the number one contender for the last time.

Before the match began, there was the introduction of notables and local celebrities in attendance. Then NWA president, Sam Muchnick, stepped between the ropes for a special presentation. The title belt Harley had lifted from Dory in May was about to be retired and replaced with a new one. The current belt Race wore, the "Thesz belt," as we called it, had been crafted in Mexico and Pat O'Connor was the first to wear it after his victory over Dick Hutton on January 9, 1959.

Actually, the championship belt prior to the "Thesz belt" was the original "Thesz" belt. That was the belt Lou wore with such pride on and off

since 1937, and which now belonged to him. It had been around since the late 1920s and had been held by such great champions as Ed "Strangler" Lewis, Everett Marshall, "Whipper" Billy Watson, and Bobby Managoff.

In the late ‘40s and ‘50s, Lou was on a quest to unite all the "world heavyweight titles" into one — the National Wrestling Alliance title. In 1948, Lou defeated "Wild" Bill Longson in Indianapolis for the world title recognized by the National Wrestling Association (part of the National Boxing Association). He defeated "Gorgeous George" Wagner in July 1950 in Chicago to take the American Wrestling Association version, and made it a clean sweep in 1953 when he defeated Baron Michelle Leone in Hollywood for the California-recognized title. Prior to the match with Leone, Lou notified the NWA brass that after he unified the title, the belt would be his and no longer the property of the NWA. What could they say? Lou was in the driver’s seat. Besides, they all agreed that Lou not only deserved the belt, but

he had more than earned it.

When Hutton defeated Lou in Toronto in 1957, Dick won the world heavyweight championship, but he didn't get the belt that went along with it. A regional belt was being used while a new world belt was being created in Mexico. Dick never got the opportunity to wear it as he lost his title to Pat O'Connor in January 1959.

The belt Harley was trading in had served its purpose and had become worn and jagged. It had been strapped around the waists of O'Connor, Rogers, Thesz, Kiniski, Funk, and now Race. It had been carried around the globe and had been the focus of thousands upon thousands of matches. It had been beaten, tugged on, displayed, and fought over for almost fifteen years. After one match in Atlanta, Tim Woods thought he won the belt from Junior and had the belt in his hands when Dory Senior ran out from the crowd and jerked the belt from his grasp. The metal on the faceplate had become so thin that the edge of the faceplate sliced

the palm of Tim's hand and required a large number of stitches. It was time to retire the belt and put it with wrestling's most-treasured archives.

The presentation of the new belt was promoted almost as much as the match itself. On Tuesday, July 17, the Houston Chronicle ran a story titled "Race to Receive New Mat Belt." The Houston Post was a bit more succinct in its headline, "Race to get gold belt." Paul Boesch wasn't going to miss a trick in getting folks to the Coliseum on that Friday night. History was going to be made whether I won the title or not. A new belt would be established in Houston. Surely, if the match didn't bring them in, the presentation would.

The new belt was totally different than the one which had preceded it. The old belt was smaller and mounted on a black leather strap. The new one was somewhat bigger and weighed about ten pounds. It was leather, but it had red velvet wrapped around it. The old one proclaimed

"Champion of the World" and "NWA" in large, red letters under a red crown, and behind the figures of two wrestlers, beneath which was the word "Heavyweight." The four side-plates were domes on a six-pointed star-like background.

The new faceplate was more rectangular in shape. Across the top were the words, "WORLDS HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION." Underneath was a domed globe with two black onyx plates on either side, each displaying a diamond. Beneath the globe was the word "WRESTLING." To the left of that was a United States flag and to the right a cast of two wrestlers. The side plates showed the flags of Japan, Australia, Canada, and Mexico. Sam brought it to the ring in a specially-made case. It was a beautiful belt and it seemed to glow under the stark glare of the ring lights.

Interestingly enough, I had seen the belt a month or so before that night, when I was on my "everyone beat Jack Brisco" tour. I had wrestled in Los Angeles, doing a job for "Superstar" Billy

Graham [Wayne Coleman], so I could come back with the title and have a rematch with him. Sam Muchnick asked me pick up the new belt from Mike LeBell, who was the promoter there. He had just received it from Mexico and I was to deliver it to Sam in St. Louis.

It all was very hush-hush in the way it was handled. You would think we were all involved in some sort of espionage. I took the belt, locked it in the case, carried it onto the plane, and held onto it until I placed it safely in Sam's hands. Heaven forbid that contender Jack Brisco would be seen with the new world championship belt. In many cases, the new champion, be it the world title or a regional title, would have promotional pictures made with the belt just before winning the title. After the title had changed hands, the title pictures would be mailed out immediately to promoters for use in newspapers and programs, on posters, and to sell at the arenas. That was not the case here; there were no pictures taken at all. The belt went straight from Mexico to Los Angeles and

then on to St. Louis.

A short ceremony was held during the minutes before our match began, with Sam giving a brief history of the title belt and pictures being made with Harley and Sam holding it. Harley posed for a few pictures prior to our match, but he never buckled the belt around his waist. He held it around his waist, but he didn't fasten it. It wasn't necessary, but I did appreciate the fact that, after all I had to go through to face him for the title, I would be the first one to actually wear it.

There we were. After all the pomp and circumstance, Harley was standing next to Muchnick with both world title belts. Forty minutes later, he wouldn't have either one.

Another interesting side story about the belt was the fact that it was mounted on red velvet. The velvet made a beautiful backdrop for the gold faceplate, but it didn't prove to be very functional. After working an hour match, with all

the sweat and grime that went with it, the velvet didn't stand up very long. It quickly began to turn black and fall apart, so they took the belt from me, removed the face and side plates, put them on a black leather strap, and replaced the buckle in the back with snaps to fasten it.

I had the belt for about six months before they made the alterations. When they took the belt to refurbish it, I was supposed to have the week off, but they didn't get it done in time, so Sam gave me the "Thesz" belt to defend for a couple of weeks. It was many years after I retired from the ring before I first saw a picture of me with the old belt. I used to kid Lou that I looked better in it than he did. Lou would laugh and agree with me. I think he was just being kind.

Sam Muchnick was 67 years old when he walked into the ring that night to present the new world title belt to Harley. The new belt signified the dawn of a new era of both wrestling and the world championship. Sam presenting it that night served

to preserve the lineage and history of the title; connecting wrestling's glorious past with its promising future.

Sam had been born in the Ukraine to Jewish parents. They were residents of St. Louis and were traveling at the time of his birth, which came two months earlier than they expected. He was originally named Jeshua, the Russian equivalent of Jesus, and later was named Samuel by his father (thinking the name Jesus was not appropriate for a young American boy).

Muchnick, the impresario of wrestling since the 1940s, began his sports career as a sportswriter. Starting with the St. Louis Times, and later with the St. Louis Star-Times, Sam covered sports, including the wrestling beat, which put him into contact with promoter Tom Packs. Sam's newspaper background and contacts opened the door to the wrestling world and he left the newspaper to join Pack as his publicist. After nine years, he had a falling out with Packs and

started his own promotion, with the assistance of the current world heavyweight champion at the time, Jim Londos, the "Golden Greek."

The first years of promoting for Sam were lean as he had to contend with small crowds because most of the top talent was working for Packs. During this time, Packs sold his promotion to Martin Thesz, the father of Lou Thesz, who was making a name for himself throughout the Midwest. Actually, Martin Thesz was a front for Lou, who had put up the lion's share of the financing, but wanted to remain anonymous.

In 1948, Muchnick and fellow promoters Pinky George of Des Moines, Wally Karbo and Tony Stecher (brother of former world heavyweight champion Joe Stecher) of Minneapolis, Orville Brown of Kansas City, and Max Clayton of Omaha, met at the President Hotel in Waterloo, Iowa, to form an alliance between the promoters and to declare and promote one world champion. George was elected the first president

and Brown their first champion. Another reason for joining together was that, up to that time, the rules and regulations for wrestling (as well as boxing) came from the National Boxing Association, a group of loosely-confederated members of various state athletic commissions. Now, the newly-formed National Wrestling Alliance, or NWA, would be the organization which would have the authority to govern wrestling.

Later that year, Sam and Lou came to terms and joined their promotions. Lou was named the new NWA champion when Brown was blinded in an automobile accident before the two were scheduled to meet in the ring. In 1950, Sam was elected to the presidency of the NWA and held the post for the better part of nine years. The main job of being president was to book the world heavyweight champion with member territories, for which he would receive three percent of every gate in which the champion appeared.

Being president of the growing National Wrestling Alliance and running his own territory was difficult at best, and most presidents were decidedly more interested in promoting their own territories than promoting the world champion. Muchnick relinquished the presidency in 1960, but was approached three years later to once again lead the NWA. He entered his second presidency and held the office until retiring in 1977 at the age of 72, spending a total of a quarter of a century at the helm of the National Wrestling Alliance.

He retired from promoting on January 1, 1982, with his final show drawing more than 21,000 fans. Sam's popularity with the boys and other promoters can be sized up in one statement. When a fellow promoter was asked why Sam had such a long tenure as president, his answer was, "Who else can we trust?"

Sam and I were good friends for years. I saw him a short time before he passed away at the age of

93, just two days shy of the 1999 New Year. We were being honored by Vince McMahon, along with Lou Thesz, Gene Kiniski, Dory Funk Jr., and Harley Race, at a pay-per-view in St. Louis called "St. Louis Legends."

With all the men who had promoted, won, and defended the world title before us and had lighted our path to Houston, it all came down to this night: Harley, the champion, waiting in his corner, and me, the challenger in mine. At the opening bell, I went after Race as if my life depended on it. We battled back and forth, but at around the 10-minute mark, Harley caught me in his vertical suplex and pinned me for the first fall.

Usually, in a two-out-of-three-fall title match, the contender will win the first fall to build the drama. The champion then has to face the almost Herculean task of winning the last two falls to retain his title, while the contender only has to win one to win the championship. The fans are watching more than a wrestling match ... they are

watching King Lear or Henry V with the fate of the wrestling world hanging in the balance.

The pressure now was on me. I had to come up with a way to win two straight falls to accomplish what most fans had paid their hard-earned dollars to see happen — the crowning of a new champion.

Between falls, I did my best to sell the effects of Race's devastating maneuver. I slumped in my corner and nursed my back. When the bell rang, Harley took the offensive and kept hammering at my back; body-slamming me and hitting me with back-drops and short suplexes. I countered with single leg takedowns and by working on his legs. To end the second fall, Harley had me in a headlock; I bent his leg at the knee, lifted him up and dropped his knee over my thigh. He fell to the mat and I locked in the figure four to take the second fall at the 25-minute mark and even the match.

When the bell rang for the third fall, Harley sat on

the mat in his corner and begged me to give him a few more minutes so he could recuperate and regain his feet. The referee stood between us, holding me back, as I eagerly advanced on the prone champion. The final fall lasted about fifteen minutes and ended when Harley whipped me into the ropes, expecting to backdrop me when I rebounded towards him. Instead of going over his back, I went straight into him with a flying body scissors, putting him flat on his back. I locked my legs around his waist as he almost doubled over with me on top of him on the mat.

The referee, long-time veteran wrestler Bronko Lubich, dropped to the mat and, with the third slap of his hand on the mat, made the three-count. It had actually happened! I was the new heavyweight champion of the world. I had planned to win the belt with the finishing move Lou created. It was no secret that Lou was my idol and had the most influence on my career. It was because of him and Danny Hodge that I began to entertain the thought of becoming a professional wrestler. Using the

"Thesz Press" to win the title was my way of saying thanks to Lou.

Dozens of thoughts rushed through my mind as Paul Boesch rushed into the ring and hugged me. Harley remained on his knees on the mat, with his hands raised by his sides, palms up, and gesturing to the crowd with a surprised look on his face, as if to say, "What happened?" My old friend from my early Texas days with Fritz, Tiger Conway Sr., came into the ring and put the belt around my waist. But it wasn't official. Not until they announced it from the center of the ring.

Ring announcer Boyd Pierce and referee Lubich raised both my hands in victory as Pierce announced, "The winner and new heavyweight champion of the world ... Jack Brisco!" I had repeated those words thousands of times while growing up and standing in front of the mirror in my bedroom in Blackwell. Every backyard match I won, wrestling with my brothers or friends, always was for that title, but it wasn't complete

until I heard those words. The entire Houston Coliseum nearly erupted upon hearing Pierce's proclamation. Sam came in and congratulated me, we had pictures made, and then it was time to go out and celebrate.

The funny thing is, I didn't want to leave the ring. I wanted to savor every second of what had just taken place. I knew no matter how many times I might win the title, it would never be like it was at that moment in time. I thought of Lou and the champions who went before me. I wondered if they all felt the way I was feeling at that moment. I had no idea if they had, of course, but I truly hoped they did. How could they not have?

With all the good feelings that night, the victory was still bittersweet. Winning the title was the proudest moment of my life; even so, it wasn't all I had hoped it would be. All the games Dory Funk Sr. had played to keep me from getting the title, or at least keeping it away from me for awhile, left me a little disappointed in the process. Even so, I

was thrilled to have achieved the goal I had set for myself as a kid. It was just a bit anti-climatic, that's all.

My brother Gerry told me he wasn't convinced I was going to get the title that night when we had talked earlier that day before I left for Houston. Gerry was originally booked to be on the card in Houston that night, but he was headlining for Crockett and Jim needed him for a big card in Richmond. Although Harley and everyone else involved agreed and guaranteed the title switch, Gerry was still a bit worried with all the subterfuge that had taken place in March.

When Gerry finished wrestling in the main event that night, he found Jim backstage and asked if there was any news from Houston. He said he hadn't heard anything yet. Gerry suggested they call the Coliseum and try to get Boesch on the phone. Of course, that was in the days before cell phones, so they had to call the Coliseum office and ask someone to find Paul and get him on the

phone. It took a few tries, but Gerry and Jim finally got Paul on the phone. He told them everything went as planned and I was the new world champion. I think Gerry was as happy and relieved as I was, and from what I heard, there was as much celebrating in Richmond that night as there was in Houston.

I have been asked countless times how winning the world heavyweight championship compared to winning the NCAA title. There is really more contrast than comparison. They both had been goals of mine since my early wrestling days in Oklahoma, but that is where the comparison ends. Winning the collegiate title proved I was the best 191-pound wrestler in the nation; pure competition. Winning the world heavyweight title was all business and a tremendous, yet glorious, burden to shoulder. The titles were as different as the two sports themselves.

Nobody else knew about the title change until the next morning. There was no cable television or

pay-for-view where fans could discover the news of my victory. I did ask Boesch to send a press release to the newspapers in Blackwell and Stillwater, as well as major papers in Atlanta, Houston, and all across Florida. Everyone else would know soon enough.

Chapter 20
Ten Pounds of Gold

Ever since the birth of video-tape technology, most world title changes have been filmed. Copies of those tapes were sent to promoters worldwide to promote upcoming title defenses in their territory. Buddy Rogers' win over Pat O'Connor in 1961 was filmed, as was Dory's victory over Kiniski in 1969 and Harley's "upset" of Junior in 1973.

Mine wasn't. It has always been my belief that Dory Sr. made sure of that. He may have realized he couldn't stop me from getting the title, but he sure as hell was going to make sure I wouldn't have a video record of it. One might think that with Paul Boesch in charge of the booking that night, he could have arranged for my match to be taped. I don't know. Maybe he did want to, but no matter what the case, Senior's power and influence

with the NWA trumped whatever thoughts Boesch may have had.

On the other hand, there was one more bit of icing on the cake for me on the night I won the title. My old "friend" Billy "Red" Lyons was in the opening match that night. Billy, as you may recall, was the one who talked Fritz out of putting the Texas title on me years before. He was the one who predicted I would probably wash out of professional wrestling, and even if I didn't, I probably wouldn't amount to much. And yet, there I was, the new world champion … and there he was, in the "curtain jerker" match. I'm not one to gloat, and I didn't that night as much as I would have liked.

When a major title changed hands back then, only a select few were in on it beforehand. Only the participants, the referee, and some promoters knew. None of the boys were let in at all. Billy didn't know. He may not have stayed around if he had. When I walked into the dressing room after

the match, he was sitting in a corner, packing his bag and getting ready to leave. I walked over to him, with the belt strapped around my waist, and didn't say a word. He wouldn't look at me. He looked at the floor, to the right, to the left … everywhere but where I was standing. There was no eye contact, no congratulations. Only silence. In my mind, there really was nothing to be said. The belt spoke for itself.

Eddie Graham had flown in for the match and to take me out to dinner afterward. He had weathered the political storm with me, and for me, on my way to the title. I don't think I ever would have gotten close to the title if it hadn't been for his lobbying and advocacy on my behalf, as well as some of the other promoters he convinced to go along with him. To a large degree, my title victory was due to Eddie, so we went out and celebrated. Eddie didn't always pay for dinner, but he did that night. I ordered steak and all the trimmings. Since he was buying, I wanted the best.

Both the Houston Chronicle and the Houston Post ran fairly-long press releases on the match the next morning. It was the third time the world heavyweight title had changed hands in Houston. In 1939, Lou lost the belt to Bronko Nagurski, the all-American and all-pro football star from Minnesota, and in 1942, Bobby Managoff took the title from Canada's Yvon Robert. The newspaper article reported on my amateur career and gave a fall-by-fall account of the match. They also detailed the ceremony surrounding the presentation of the new $10,000 belt that had been specially-crafted for the NWA champion.

The championship belt has been emblematic of supremacy in the ring since 1811. The first title belt was awarded to Tom Cribb, a British heavyweight boxing champion, "in honor of many brave battles and the defeat of the American challenger, Tom Molineaus." The belt was made out of lion's skin and was ornamented with large silver lion's claws. He not only received the first championship belt, but also established the

tradition of awarding the belt to the new champion. Cribb remained undefeated for the next eleven years and, upon his retirement, presented the belt to his protégé, Tom Spring. Spring also set a precedent as he was the first man on record to use a ring name, having chosen to do battle as Tom Spring, rather than his given name, Thomas Winter.

There is a strong correlation between boxing and the world heavyweight wrestling championship belt. In fact, it was a wrestler who saved the tradition in America that eventually spread to the entire boxing and wrestling world.

In the history of the ring, the championship belt that has received the most renown was presented to the great John L. Sullivan, who is recognized as the first modern heavyweight boxing champion of the world. In 1887, as Sullivan's popularity rose, he set off on a nationwide exhibition tour to cash in on his newly-gained fame. Keenly aware of the possibility of acquiring a great amount of money, New York promoter Pat Sheedy wanted to come

up with a trophy befitting a champion of Sullivan's stature. Sheedy, who really wasn't so much a promoter as he was a big-time gambler, wanted "the best that would cost him the least," so he contrived the idea of asking the writers of the Boston newspapers to appeal to the citizens of Boston to donate their money to create a belt for their favorite son.

The idea was a hit. In no time at all, money came pouring in, with a generous start of $200 donated by Captain Cook, editor of the Boston Police News. Within a short time, more than $8,000 was raised. Sheedy contacted two Boston jewelers and gave them the charge of designing and making the Boston's Strong Boy's belt. When finished, the belt measured 48 inches long and nearly eleven inches tall. It was adorned with 397 diamonds and other precious stones. The face plate was inscribed with the words "Presented to the Champion of Champions, John L. Sullivan, by the citizens of the United States, July 4, 1887." Sullivan's name was inlayed with 250

diamonds and engraved on the back were 35 names of prominent Americans.

For its time, it was the largest piece of flat gold that had ever been seen anywhere. It was presented to John L. amidst tremendous pomp and circumstance on a hot Monday evening, August 8, 1887, in his hometown of Boston. It was the most expensively created sports trophy up to that time. It not only proclaimed him the "Champion of Champions," but it was to be his belt for time eternal. It would not change hands when he no longer was champion. He would not hand it down as Tom Cribb had. After losing the title in 1892 to "Gentleman" Jim Corbett, the artful former bank clerk from San Francisco, Sullivan kept what he extolled as his most-prized possession and the greatest sporting trophy in the world. It rarely was out of his possession as he carried it with him in a long, velvet-lined display case.

Sullivan's pugilistic prowess in the ring was only matched by his taste for whiskey and the skill with

which he could part with his money. As he continued to tour the country, Sullivan would lend his belt to friends to exhibit in their bars. The belt would increase the number of paying customers while on display and would provide more than a few drinks on the house for its owner. As time went on and the belt was passed around, the diamonds and other precious stones began to disappear. Even as the former champion, the Boston Strong Boy remained quite a draw. He continued to tour the world and, in the four years from 1895 to 1898, Sullivan netted more than a quarter of a million dollars. That was quite a sum in those days, but unfortunately, he spent it as quickly as it came in.

As strong as his affection was for the belt, his affection for drink and good times were stronger. He pawned the belt several times, receiving the sums of $5,000 and $3,000, to pay his drinking debts. The belt would always be rescued by friends of the sinking ex-champion, and each time, fewer and fewer of the precious stones

remained. Sullivan also was known to sell the diamonds himself to his pals to take care of the ready cash he needed at any particular time.

One close friend who saved the belt and the tradition, at least for a while, was the recognized world heavyweight wrestling champion William Muldoon. Sullivan and Muldoon had become fast friends and Muldoon trained his boxing counterpart for his bare-knuckle battle with Jake Kilrain in 1899. Muldoon paid Sullivan's debt and gained possession of the belt, but immediately returned it to the great John L. for what would be the final time in 1900.

In 1905, Sullivan turned his life around and gave up drinking. He began to tour the country as a temperance speaker, still holding onto and exhibiting his most precious possession. Thanks to William Muldoon, he never had to pawn the belt again. Unfortunately, all the years of hard living eventually caught up with Sullivan. He was an old man when he passed away in 1918 … at the young

age of 59.

Boxing has kept up with the Sullivan and the Cribb traditions. When a new boxing champion is crowned, the former champion keeps his belt and a new one is given to the new champion. Wrestling has its own tradition; the belts were passed down from champion to champion. One of the reasons, I'm sure, is the belts belonged to the promoters, and not the champion, except in Lou Thesz' case. I don't know of any world champion who disapproved of giving up the belt with the title as long as the $25,000 bond was returned to them.

It is difficult to find a picture of the early wrestling champions like Muldoon, Farmer Burns, and Frank Gotch, wearing a championship belt, but according to most wrestling historians, they did have them. Gotch's esteem and recognition, in those days, began to approach that accorded Sullivan, Corbett, Tommy Burns, Jefferies, and other boxing champions.

The belt became more prominent with George Hackenschmidt, the Russian Lion, who lost his crown to Frank Gotch. Joe Stecher, the "Scissor King," can be seen in early photos supporting the world title belt presented to him in 1915 after he won the world title from Gotch's nominal successor, Charlie Cutler. Since then, a belt has been the centerpiece of every world championship match.

The National Police Gazette, which for many years was the country's leading sporting and adventure tabloid, not only presented championship belts to various boxing champions, but also established a championship belt to award each year to the nation's top scientific wrestler. In 1952, the first "Outstanding Scientific Wrestler of the Year" Police Gazette belt was awarded to Verne Gagne. Throughout my title run, I believe the most-asked question I received from fans as I traveled around the world was, "Can I see the belt?"

The night I won the title, I suppose I felt a lot like John L Sullivan had. I wouldn't let the belt out of my sight, but I knew there was work to be done, so after dinner, I caught the red-eye from Houston to Atlanta. I had to be at a television taping at ten o'clock in the morning. We took off at two o'clock in the morning, which was three o'clock back in Atlanta.

By the time the plane touched down and I collected my luggage, it was 4:30 in the morning. My thoughts had moved from the title to getting a few hours sleep before I had to wrestle again. At the time, I was living in a condo I had purchased in Decatur. It was located on the opposite side of town from the airport. When I was a block from home, an Atlanta police officer pulled in behind me with his blue lights flashing and siren blaring. I pulled over to the side of the road and waited for the officer to get out of his car. He asked me what I was doing out at that time in the morning. I tried to collect my thoughts so I could explain the best I could. It was tough

because I hadn't slept much for the better part of the past two days. I managed to tell him I had just flown in from Houston and I was on my way home.

The whole time we were talking, he kept shining his flashlight into my car. The beam fell on the case on the front seat, which held the championship belt. He must have thought it looked like a case gangsters used to store their guns. "What's that?" he asked.

"I'm a professional wrestler. I just won the world heavyweight title in Houston and that case contains the belt."

I don't think he believed me because he asked me to open the case ... slowly. As I did, his hand moved towards his gun; instinctively, I'm sure. As I slowly opened the case, I was thinking, "I have got to get to bed. This can't be happening."

No matter what I had told him, I still think he had convinced himself that I had a gun or drugs in the

case. When I opened it and his light shone on the gold of the belt, his eyes almost popped out of his head. "Oh, my God! Can I touch it?" he asked.

"Sure, go ahead," I answered.

The belt was brand new, and with all ten pounds of gold shining on that red velvet strap, it looked beautiful. It took away his breath. His entire tone changed and we stood outside my car and talked for about 30 minutes. He kept saying, "I just can't believe I'm talking to the new world champion."

I guess the best thing about the whole incident was that he didn't give me a ticket. As I was getting back into my car, he asked me where I lived. When I told him just a block or so up the road, he asked if I would like him to follow me home. "Sure. Thanks, officer." I walked through the front entrance of my condo a few minutes later. Not too bad for a night's work. I had only had the title for a few hours and I had already received my first police escort, as brief as it was.

Chapter 21
The Worst Payoff Man

Owning the title proved to be good for business from the outset. The NWA wasted no time in promoting me as champion. Two special programs were printed within a few days, to be sold in arenas everywhere the National Wrestling Alliance banner hung. The NWA published a 16-page "Official Commemorative Edition" titled, "Crowning a Champion!" It featured copies of newspaper headlines leading up to the match with Race, articles from the day after, copies of the program sold at the Sam Houston Arena, photographs, facts about my career, and a listing of previous champions. It contained a lot of information for the one-dollar cover price.

Not to be outdone, Atlanta promoters Paul Jones and Lester Welch published their own "Special Commemorative Brisco Edition" of the weekly

program, The Ringsider. They wanted to get it out as quickly as possible, so it contained no pictures of the title match, but it did feature a story of my return home to Atlanta, facts about my career, and focused on the men who had promised to relieve me of my title in short order — Bill Watts, Dory Funk Jr., Tim Woods, and Bobby Shane. They sold thousands nationwide; everyone made a good amount of money from the sales. Everyone, that is, but the new champion about whom they so proudly boasted.

I only got a few hours sleep before I had to get up and head to the television studio for the regular taping that morning. The taping in Atlanta was done on Saturday morning at WTBS, which later would become one of the country's first cable stations, the "Superstation."

Of course, nobody knew I had won the title the night before. My old friend Gordon Solie was doing the commentary for the show and he announced to the crowd that a new world wrestling

champion had been crowned less than twelve hours earlier in Houston, Texas. Always knowing how to build up the anticipation in a crowd, Gordon waited a few moments before announcing, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to introduce the new world heavyweight champion, Atlanta's own, Jack Brisco."

I don't think I had ever heard such an ovation. I thought the roof was going to blow off the studio. Everyone acted as if they had just won the lottery. Gordon asked me for a few comments about the match the previous night and what it meant for me to finally achieve my goal. Gerry had come down for the long day of taping we had scheduled, which made my first day as champion complete.

The accolades didn't last long. It was time to get to work in the ring. Winning the world title wasn't the only goal I had set for myself. I wanted to be remembered as one of the most active, fighting champions in the annals of the sport. After the

interview, I retired to the dressing room and put on my gear to get ready to get into the ring. The opponent I faced that morning was Jerry Oates, a good, solid hand who got his start working for Fred Ward in Columbus, Georgia.

One of the most memorable matches I had took place only three days after winning the belt. I defended my title in Miami Beach against my idol and friend, Lou Thesz. Eddie had the perfect angle; Lou going for his seventh world championship against his former student, the new champion, Jack Brisco. I always was a bit nervous when I had to face Lou because I was in such awe of him. After all, he was Lou Thesz.

It was a strange feeling for me to have. Wrestlers don't think of themselves as heroes. We may be heroes to the fans, but not to each other. A younger wrestler may feel a bit of awe regarding a wrestler who had been part of the ring wars for a number of years, especially the ones they grew up reading about or idolizing. But after awhile — when on

the road, in the dressing room, or working in the ring — that awe begins to wane.

It is a very dangerous thing to idolize the man you are wrestling. You can't be a fan and an opponent at the same time. If you have too much respect for the guy across the ring, you can't do your job. Even worse, you can injure yourself or your opponent. I knew this, but I had to work past those feelings, even for Lou. He was the one who taught me that. He expected professionalism from me, and I expected it of myself.

It was almost surreal for me that night. In all the times I dreamed of being the world champion, I had never imagined I would be defending my title against Lou. When I entered the ring that night — walking out last, as the champion does — Lou was waiting for me and grinning from ear to ear.

When they introduced me, the crowd went wild. It was the first time I had been back to my old territory as champion. As I waved to the

audience, I glanced over to the opposite corner where Lou was standing. He was applauding along with the rest of the crowd. He had helped train me and taught me about the business and all its pitfalls. And there he was, applauding me as much as anyone in the building. In my mind, there was another champion there that night. I may have been the champion of record, but Lou was still the champion to me.

I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy being the champion. The benefits more than made up for whatever drawbacks came along with the belt. Travel was extensive and tiring at times, but the payoffs were more money than I had ever thought of making in my life. Some of the smaller venues I was booked in could be a lot less, so the NWA would try to avoid them as much as possible, not only for me, but for Muchnick, because he received three percent of the gross of every card on which I appeared.

As champion, I was supposed to receive ten

percent of the gross from every gate. There were, of course, a few promoters who would try to cheat you on the payoff, claiming their expenses were too high, or the gate may have seemed good, but a lot of the tickets were complimentary to sponsors or other folks to whom he owed favors.

I became very adept at counting the crowd from the wings before I walked to the ring. That was as important a skill to have as anything I learned on the mat. Most of the boys could do that, but it was even more important to me since I was being paid on a percentage, rather than a set payoff for a main event. I wanted to make sure I had a pretty good idea what my take should be.

When Joe Scarpa wrestled for a promoter of less than questionable ethics, he would pay a kid 20 bucks to stand at the entrance of the arenas with a grocery "clicker" and count the fans as they walked through the door.

Everyone who gets into professional wrestling

learns pretty quickly that not all promoters were shining examples of honesty. Reputations, both good and bad, preceded them long before you entered their territories. For the ones who fell on the darker side of the spectrum, you would know before arriving how bad you were going to get screwed before you got there. They would do anything they could to avoid paying you what you were due. Even if they knew they couldn't get away with it, they would give it the old college try on the off-chance you wouldn't be paying attention.

The promoters would print and sell their own tickets, which, conveniently, weren't numbered, so there was no actual way to tell how many tickets were sold. For years, wrestling was a cash business, and being so, it was easy for the more unscrupulous promoters to forget exactly how much money had been taken in to report for tax purposes. Can you imagine a wrestling promoter trying to take money from the boys who worked for him? It almost defies reason. I always thought they would want to keep their employees happy in

order to keep and draw good talent. Some promoters looked at it that way, but others saw us as nothing more than an independent labor force whose happiness with their working conditions were the furthest thing from their minds.

Many a night, wrestlers walked into a promoter's office to receive their pay, only to see them stuffing their pockets with the cash from the gate. Being an all-cash business, we couldn't prove a thing. However, being the champion did provide me with another benefit the other boys didn't have: no matter what depths the promoters would sink to, none of them wanted to be on bad terms with the world champion or the NWA, whoever it was.

The worst payoff man — next to Nick Gulas, believe it or not — was right here in Florida; my old pal, Eddie Graham. He had it down to a science. I think all the thieves from across the country would come to Eddie for lessons. He would pocket part of the gate and pay his son, Mike, more for his matches than the rest of us. One

day, Gerry and I were going over the books and we found an expenditure of $45,000 for a color radar unit for Eddie's private plane. It had been charged to Florida Championship Wrestling, meaning, the partners (and to another extent, the boys) had to pay for it. Lester Welch, our partner, and Eddie's "bag man," would, on more than a few occasions, mysteriously get robbed and lose the proceeds of the gate. What poor luck he had.

The promoters weren't all like that, thank goodness. Paul Boesch, Sam Muchnick, Don Owen in Oregon, and Roy Shire in California were good to work with. Jim Crockett Sr. in the Carolinas paid the main-event wrestlers well, but not so the preliminary boys.

Chapter 22
A Visit with Jim Barnett

Even though I was the world champion, I still paid most of my own expenses. The promoters would pay for my transportation to a territory and, if I spent any time there, transportation to and from the towns. I was responsible for my food, lodging, and anything else I needed. I lived by plane schedules. Every month, the major airlines sent me their flight schedules, and I carried the books with me everywhere. That helped me keep things organized and offered proof to skeptical promoters who questioned my integrity.

During one trip to Dallas, I had to fight Von Erich for reimbursement for my airline travel from Tampa to Dallas. I knew something was up when I went to get paid after my match and the

transportation reimbursement wasn't included in the envelope. Von Erich sent one of his lackeys to pay me, hoping I would let the transportation issue slide. There was little chance of that. When I asked about it, he told me I had to take it up with Fritz. I stormed into Fritz's office and asked him for my money. He stood up from behind his desk and accused me of overcharging him for the airfare. I couldn't believe it. I had worked for Fritz during my early years and had wrestled against him several times on the way to the title. We had never had a cross word between us.

He finally handed me an envelope with my transportation money, but it was short $114. I pulled out the airline guide I carried with me and pointed out the cost of the tickets. I even showed him my airline tickets to prove I wasn't padding my expenses. Fritz wouldn't budge. He dug in and told me there was no way he was going to pay me what I asked. When I finally reached the end of my patience, I told him, "Listen, you son-of-a-bitch. The NWA says I have to come here to

defend the title, so here I am, but, as far as wanting to be here, you are the last man I would ever want to work for. So, if it's all right with Muchnick, I prefer never to come back to your territory again."

An astonished look washed over his face and he slowly slumped back down into the chair behind his desk. I'm sure he wasn't used to having any of the boys speak to him in that manner, especially the world heavyweight champion. "Jack. Calm down. The last person I want to have trouble with is the world champion," Fritz said.

I told him "Well, Fritz. You do have trouble with me. You called me a liar over one hundred fourteen dollars. You can keep your one hundred fourteen dollars and you will never see me in any of your rings again."

I walked out the door. As far as I was concerned, that was the last time I would return to Dallas. There were plenty of territories and promoters waiting in line to book me in their

towns. There were so many, in fact, that I couldn't appear for everyone who wanted me. I wasn't about to waste my time with someone like Von Erich.

A couple of weeks later, I received a check in the mail from Fritz for $250, along with a letter of apology. I did return to wrestle in Fritz's territory, but we never spoke again. He never shorted me on my transportation, either.

Texas had grown to be a good territory and I was drawing well as champion. The roster of the boys there was as good as anywhere and I battled them all — Wahoo McDaniel, Jose Lothario, Al Madril, Ivan Putski, Red Bastien, Mil Mascaras, Blackjack Mulligan, Johnny Valentine, and, of course, Dory and Terry Funk.

After all the problems with the Funks, Junior still remained one of my favorite opponents. There is an old saying in boxing that holds for wrestling, as well. Styles make matches. Our wrestling styles

complemented each other more than anybody else I had ever wrestled. We drew sell-out crowds everywhere we met — St. Petersburg, Atlanta, Greensboro, Dallas, Houston, St. Louis, Japan, Amarillo, Tokyo — and many fans were turned away at the door.

I tried never to let the problems I had experienced with Dory's father interfere with doing business with either Dory or Terry. As the champion, I had a job to do and I took the title seriously. I wanted to be above the politics and pettiness that revolved around the title. The championship was mine, and it was my responsibility to make sure it was held above the fray. It wasn't a regional belt. It represented the best in the world, and at this point, the best happened to be me. There had been many champions before me, and there would be many more to follow. How I handled myself as the champion would have a lot to do with how the world title was perceived in the years ahead.

Unfortunately, not all my opponent's styles were

as compatible as Dory's. Bob Windham, who wrestled as Blackjack Mulligan, was a big man. He weighed 345 pounds and was extremely tall at six-foot-nine. He played professional football with the New York Jets during the 1966 pre-season, but his dreams of playing the NFL vanished when he broke his leg. Sonny Werblin, one of the owners of the Jets and the president of Madison Square Garden, suggested he look into wrestling.

There is one thing in particular I remember about our matches … they were awful. Mulligan was as slow as he was big. The only thing that really got him over with the fans was his size and the fact that he was so powerful. Our styles didn't match well and that's the kiss of death for any match. It was fortunate for both of us that we didn't have to wrestle more than a few times. He did well when he worked for the Crocketts in the Mid-Atlantic area, and he had a good run with partner, Black Jack Lanza, when he went to work for the McMahons in the WWWF.

Lanza and I, on the other hand, had some great matches. He was a hell of a wrestler and worked on top everywhere he went. Jack was from Albuquerque, New Mexico and attended the University of Minnesota, where he began his career as a school teacher. He began wrestling in 1962 under the watchful eyes of Verne Gagne and Roy Shire. At six-foot-five and 250 pounds, he wasn't quite as big as Mulligan. He still works in the business as a road agent for World Wrestling Entertainment.

One of the most colorful wrestlers on the circuit was Mil Mascaras, whose name means "Man of a Thousand Masks." In fact, using the word colorful does him a disservice. He came to wrestling by a different vehicle than the rest us. His character was created to fill a void in the Mexican action-movie industry. Wrestling in Mexico transcends all mediums, much more than its American counterparts. Wrestlers like El Santo, the Blue Demon, and Mascaras were viewed as athletes, movie stars, superheroes, and even had comic

books written about them.

The story, as I am told, began in 1964 when a Mexican movie producer, Enrique Vergara, found himself in a dilemma. The movies featuring the luchadores (Mexican wrestlers) were translating into box office ticket sales and fans were attending the wrestling shows in big number. El Santo and the Blue Demon were as famous for their exploits on the screen as in the ring. Heroes battling vampires, werewolves, and a whole host of evil-doers bent on the destruction of the heroes, as well as the rest of the world, kept Mexican movie-goers on the edge of their seats. A problem arose, however, when his two main stars were not available to film their next installment due to injuries and other commitments.

That being the case, Vergara began a search to find his next star. He discovered him in Aaron Rodríguez. Aaron was less than six feet tall, but he had a powerful build and could move like a cat in the ring. The gimmick Vergara gave Rodríguez

was one of the most ingenious in many years. The new masked hero would not have one mask, like Santo and the Blue Demon. He would have a thousand masks — hence the name Mil Mascaras — and he would wear a different mask every time he entered the ring.

That only lasted for a month or two because the makers ran out of design ideas, so he wore a signature mask, which was silver and black with a red "M" in the center of the forehead. He would enter the ring wearing one of his other masks over it and, when he was introduced, he would pull off the outer mask to reveal the silver and black.

He became such a big hit on the screen that the demand began to swell for this new, faceless champion of justice to enter the local rings to fight local villains who menaced the hometown heroes of lucha libre. Surely, if he could save the world from the most evil monsters imaginable, he could make the ring safe for those who upheld the rules. He hit the ring in the same fashion as he hit

the movie screen. Mil became an instant success. His colorful masks, Olympic physique, and high-flying style catapulted him to the top and he captured many titles during his career.

Mascaras was one of the first masked Mexican stars who really got over in the States, but there was one huge star who preceded him. Cesáreo Manríquez González, the original El Medico Asesino in Mexico, held the Texas title in 1957 and 1958 and was a big star here until his death from cancer in 1960. He is credited as being the first wrestler to wear the white mask, trunks and boots and use the Medico/Medic/Doctor gimmick. He also played the title role in the first lucha movie, El Enmascarado de Plata.

The Blue Demon and El Santo ventured into Texas from time to time, but they really didn't have much success. They weren't bad workers. In fact, they worked well, but smaller men just didn't excite American crowds as the big men did. Fans in the States didn't understand the Lucha style of

wrestling, either. Mil, however, did well where the others fell short. He wasn't as tall as many of the American boys, but his build and airborne skills in the ring thrilled the fans. He drew well, especially in Los Angeles and Texas, where there was a high number of Mexican fans.

Mil also was the first masked wrestler to appear in Madison Square Garden. New York didn't allow wrestlers to wear a mask, but Vince found a way for the state to approve Mil's appearance for a one-time shot.

I only remember defending the title against Mascaras one time. We met in Los Angeles for Mike LeBell. I had been told that Mil was stiff and difficult to work with — kind of a prima donna — but nothing could have been further from the truth as far as I was concerned. He was so loose in the ring, and he had such a light touch, that you could barely feel him. If you haven't guessed, that's a good thing. When you have to go 30 minutes to an hour with a guy who doesn't drop his

weight on you during the match, it makes things go so much easier and provides a much faster pace and more enjoyable match for the fans, as well as the wrestlers. If your opponent lies on you and makes you carry his weight, even the most highly-conditioned athlete will wear out in time.

I did have to adapt to his style quickly when we wrestled, but by that time, I had gotten used to adapting to different styles and different wrestlers every night. We put on an entertaining match in Los Angeles. It was nothing like the matches I was used to having, but there was a large Hispanic crowd that night and Mascaras had quite a following, so I did my best to follow his lead. I think the fans enjoyed it. That was the goal Mil and I both were trying to achieve.

The strangest thing about that night happened after the match. I saw Mil in the shower … and he was still wearing his mask. We were the only two people in the dressing room and he still wore his hood. I looked at him and laughed. "You crazy

son-of-a-bitch. What do I care what you look like." I don't know if he understood me or not, but I left that night with a great story to tell

Mil had a great career that continues today. In 1974, he was "world" heavyweight champion of the short-lived International Wrestling Association's, a company created and run by Chicago White Sox owner Eddie Einhorn. Mil defended his title against former world champions Lou Thesz, Ivan Koloff, and stars of the day, including Ox Baker, Eric the Red, and the Mongols.

My main job as the world champion was to travel from territory to territory and face the top talent in each area. I was not only there to defend my title and draw the crowd, but I was there to make their top guys look better than me. The contender had to look better than the champion and appear as though they could beat me at any time. That kept the fans involved in the match and assured a good crowd for a return match. When I would win, it would be

just barely; by reversing a hold or taking advantage of the mistake of an overconfident contender who was about to win the third and deciding fall.

It was a great deal of fun and I enjoyed it immensely. I took a lot of pride in my title defenses and, of course, that's what would draw the fans. Drawing fans meant drawing money and that was the name of the game. Make no mistake about it; my job was to make anyone, and I mean anyone, I wrestled look like they were the world champion, and not me. However, making an opponent look like the world champion wasn't always easy. In many of the territories, it was an almost impossible task.

I was traveling all over the world and, sometimes, I had to wrestle two or three times in a single day. On weekends, there would be a television taping on Saturday morning and then a match that evening, or on Sunday. Often, I would do a double shot, like wrestling in Asheville, North Carolina, on Sunday afternoon and in Atlanta

or Toronto that evening.

I seldom knew from one night to the next who I was going to be wrestling. The fans knew who I was going to face long before I did. They had to know because they bought the tickets. Their anticipation of the world title match-up brought them to the arenas in blizzards, hurricanes, and every other weather situation you could imagine.

In most cases, I wouldn't know who I was booked to wrestle until I got to the arena. In some cases, if I was running late due to travel connections, I didn't know the identity of my opponent until I stepped into the ring. In some of the smaller territories like Tennessee, parts of Alabama, Louisiana, and even some parts of Texas, not only didn't I know who I was going to be wrestling, but in many case, I had never even heard of them. In a good territory, those guys would never have made it to mid-card. Some of them were as bad as they were unknown. Ten to fifteen minutes into the match, they would be

completely blown up and out of energy. Many times, when we had 45 or more minutes to fill, I would be thinking, "I do this every night and this guy can't even work for fifteen minutes." When they began to fade on me, or when they dropped to the mat, I would increase the pressure on a hold or take them down hard and drop my knee across their neck. That would usually do the trick. When they realize I meant business, they would sit straight up and begin to move. "This is for the world championship. At least try to look like you belong here," I would tell them, in one way or another.

As champion, I was expected to put in the most time in the ring. Matches usually would start between eight o'clock and 8:30. The promoters had to give the fans at least a two-hour show. Anything shorter would kill the territory and people would stop attending the matches.

A lot of times, the boys on the undercard wouldn't feel like working, so they would cut their matches short. They figured I was making all the

money, so why should they have to work so hard when the world champion on the card. "Let's make him work." When that happened, which was not all that infrequent, I would have to fill in the time. Night after night, seven days a week, I was the 60-minute man.

The small towns were the toughest. When the matches were over, I showered, packed my gear, and left the arena. Everybody else was already on their way home — both the fans and the wrestlers — and if I was driving, I had to make the trip alone. In most cases, I would leave the arena no earlier than 11:30 p.m. and I would be starving, but all the restaurants were closed. Even the McDonalds would be closed for the night.

That was the early to mid-'70s, an era when many of the small towns rolled up the sidewalks at five o'clock. I would make the long drive to my hotel with nothing to eat. I'd get home late (or early, depending on your point of view), try to get a few hours of sleep, and get ready to hit the road for the

next town.

Such was the glamorous life of the world heavyweight champion.

I made notes about what was and wasn't open in each town so I knew where I could eat during late hours. If I knew a particular town wouldn't have anything available at such a late hour, I made sure to pack a few sandwiches to eat in my room. When I held the belt, I ate a lot of convenience-store sandwiches. They really weren't too bad. I wasn't the only person who had to do that, either. Most of the boys had a tradition we called bologna blowouts.

Bologna blowouts or not, I loved it. The traveling was the most enjoyable part of my job. Before I won the belt, I would stay in a territory for a year or more. Being single and on the road to a new town every night left me with an exhilarating feeling. I missed my three children, but I knew they were better off in Oklahoma with

their mother than on the road with me. I called them every week, and hearing their voices made me miss them all the more.

As the world champion, I would be in a new territory every week, and on some occasions, I would find myself in a different territory every night, depending on how the bookings were laid out. More times than I can remember, I would wake up in the morning in a hotel room, exhausted after the 60-minute broadway I had wrestled the previous night ... and I would have to look at my airline ticket on the dresser to see which town I was in that morning.

The days ran into each other. I lived my life in airplanes, arenas, and hotel rooms. That was the life of the world champion. When I won the belt, I felt like I was embarking on a grand adventure, but somewhere down the line, the travel became a burden … albeit a glorious burden.

Travel connections could be difficult to make, as

well. On December 16, 1973, I experienced one of the worst travel experiences of my life. I was scheduled to wrestle in Toronto that night. Earlier that afternoon, I wrestled Taro Kobayashi on St. Louis television. As soon as I finished wrestling, I had to rush to the airport and catch a plane to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, where I would take a connecting flight to Toronto. When we reached Chicago, the pilot had to circle the runway several times before he was able to land safely. A blizzard had blown in from Canada through Lake Michigan. The snow was so thick we couldn't see more than a couple of inches in front of us.

When I walked into the terminal, I discovered that all outgoing flights had been canceled. The crew at the gate told me they didn't know how long we would be grounded. Their best guess was one hour, but they said it could be two hours or longer. Two hours later, they cleared the runway and re-opened the airport. Even so, they were only letting a few flights out of Chicago that evening

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, my flight to Toronto was one of the few approved for take-off. By the time the weather cleared and they made the decision to allow flights to leave, it was pretty late, and we were told the plane wouldn't land in Toronto until eight o'clock. The matches in Toronto began promptly at seven o'clock, so I thought it was a waste of time and money to make the trip. There was no way I could make it on time for my match.

I called the promoter, Frank Tunney, and explained the situation. I was hoping he would tell me to forget it and take the night off, but that turned out to be nothing more than wishful thinking. Frank wasted no time in telling me to get on the airplane, and that he would have someone meet me at the airport and drive me to Maple Leaf Gardens.

As soon as we touched down in Toronto and I set foot on Terra Firma, a police officer approached me and asked, "You Brisco?"

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"Well, come on. Let's go," he said.

I thought Frank really wanted me there pretty badly to have me risk my life traveling through the storm and having a police officer to meet me. No matter the cost, Tunney wanted the world champion. He didn't care about my safety; he had a sold-out crowd waiting. The officer took me to the arena with the lights flashing and sirens blaring all the way from the airport.

There was no time for me to warm up and get stretched out before the match. In fact, there wouldn't even be time for me to get to the dressing room and change into my ring gear. "Mr. Tunney told me to ask you to change in the patrol car. We have just enough time to get you there," the officer informed me.

All of a sudden, I felt the weariness from the matches I had wrestled the previous week — two

matches with Johnny Valentine (those alone would make a man tired for a week), one with Dick Murdoch, and one with Terry Funk — and the stiffness that came from the two flights and the hours of sitting on the plastic chairs in the airport, but I did what he asked. I changed into my wrestling gear in the back of the police car as we slid through the streets of Toronto.

When we pulled up to the side of Maple Leaf Gardens, I looked through the side door. One quick glance told me why Tunney had me risk my neck to get there. There wasn't an empty seat in the building. The one thing that never entered my mind was the identity of my opponent that night. As I climbed out of the patrol car, I walked to the door of the building and looked down the aisle towards the ring. The second I stepped through the doorway, I saw my opponent. He was standing in the ring, waiting for me. He was the last man I wanted to see on that particular evening. I stared at him, shook my head … and had to smile.

Johnny Valentine.

My, God! Of all the people I could have been booked against that night, I had to wrestle Johnny Valentine.

I didn't have time to think about it, though. I already was late, so I broke into a run down the aisle and leaped up onto the ring apron. As I entered the ring through the ropes, I couldn't help but think, "I don't have to worry about warming up after all. Johnny will warm me up pretty quickly." For those of you who know anything about Johnny, you'll understand what I mean by that. Johnny was one of the toughest men to ever walk this planet. In the ring, he was a monster to wrestle. If you look up "menacing" in the dictionary, you will probably find his picture. He stood six-foot-three and weighed 255 pounds. He could draw heat from the crowd simply by putting his foot on the ring step, removing it, and stepping up again.

He was born John Wisniski and grew up in Seattle, Washington. He made his ring debut in 1947 shortly after turning nineteen. Within three years, Johnny was headlining cards across the country. His matches against NWA champion Buddy Roger in the early '60s are the stuff of legends. There never, ever, will be another Johnny Valentine.

As quiet and methodical as he was in the ring, he was exactly the same outside of it. For the most part, he kept to himself, but everyone who knew him was well aware of his fierce intelligence, quick, penetrating mind, and rapier-like wit. The ribs he pulled at the expense of the rest of the boys were legendary. He was a gourmet cook, a tremendous chess player, and he had a love for books and history, which only fired his intellect all the more. In short, he was a renaissance man in trunks.

The first time I wrestled Johnny was on Tampa TV on October 1, 1968, shortly after I arrived in

the territory. I was off that Saturday night, so I actually got to watch the match when it aired. Pushing me into one of the corners of the ring, he raised his arm up into the air and prepared to nail me with one of his big forearms. When he hit me across the chest, I honestly thought my chest caved in. The television camera was shooting an angle that made it look like my chest was collapsing under the force of the blow. Trust me, it felt as bad as it looked. It took me about five minutes to begin breathing again.

Next to Lou Thesz and Danny Hodge, I had as much respect for Johnny as anyone I ever faced. He had the business down to a science. His ring psychology was tremendous and he had an unbelievable rapport with the crowd. Every move he made in the ring meant something and served to get a response from the crowd … and from whoever he was wrestling. He was second to none. He had it all; skill, the physical appearance, and he kept himself in tip-top shape. Johnny always gave me great matches. In fact, I don't

believe he ever had a bad match. At least, none I ever heard of.

Johnny would have made a great world heavyweight champion. At one time or another during his career, he held most of the major titles in just about every territory in the U.S.; Florida, Georgia, Texas, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland/Buffalo, Calgary, Toronto, California, Montreal, Japan — the list just goes on and on. But the one title that escaped his grasp was the NWA world heavyweight title. His name was in contention, but he never was given the nod. We all thought it was because he had been a bit of a wild man in his younger days. He had a reputation of being undependable at times in the ring. If he didn't want to job for someone, he just wouldn't do it, and there was nothing anybody could do about it. As he grew older, he mellowed out, but the promoters remained cautious of him. Belt or no belt, Johnny always worked on top and he had a great run everywhere he went.

His career was tragically cut short on October 4, 1975, when he, David Crockett, former Miami Dolphin Bob Bruggers, Tim Woods, and a 24-year-old Ric Flair were victims of a plane crash. The five wrestlers, along with the pilot, Joseph Farkas, boarded a Cessna 310 to fly to Wilmington, North Carolina from Charlotte. To compensate for the extra weight, Farkas dumped some of the fuel. Johnny sat in the front passenger seat and the rest of the guys were in the back. During their approach to the New Hanover Airport, the left engine began to sputter and fail. Johnny turned around and said, "Guess what? We're out of fuel." He laughed because the right engine was still running. When Farkas switched the fuel lever over to the reserve fuel tank, he discovered it was empty, too.

They were only about three miles from the runway and safety. Less than a minute later, however, the plane ripped through the treetops and dropped straight to the ground like a rock.

Johnny braced himself for the impact by placing his arms against the dashboard of the aircraft. Upon impact, the rear seats broke loose from the fuselage. The wrestlers, their seats, and their gear crashed forward into the back of Johnny's seat. The impact broke his back in three places. Farkas was thrown through the window of the plane. He never regained consciousness, but survived for six weeks before passing away. Bob Bruggers also broke his back. He recovered, but he never wrestled again. Tim was badly banged up, but through great will and courage, he returned to the ring. Ric broke his back, as well, and was told he would never wrestle again. He proved them wrong when he returned less than a year later. Johnny received the brunt of the impact, though. He never wrestled again and couldn't walk without the aid of crutches. The crutches were banded on to his arms; the arms which, at one time, we all feared.

Johnny lived in constant pain for more than 35 years. He never complained, though. Neither did

his lovely wife, Sharon, and she never left his side. Johnny took it as a part of his lot in life, I guess. He showed us all that the courage he displayed during those 28 years in the ring wasn't even a shadow of the courage he displayed during those dark years. He passed away on April 24, 2001, from complications after he suffered a fall from his porch. That short fall did what very few of us ever could — put Johnny Valentine down for the count. His son Greg carried on the family tradition in the ring.

As I said, Johnny never gave me a bad match, but that wasn't always the case with everyone I wrestled. Fortunately, my amateur background came in handy when someone tried to give me trouble. You can't being to imagine the number of times my opponent would lie in a hold and refuse to wrestle. If you want to kill a match, a card, or even an entire territory, there is no better way to do it than that. Some of them even interrupted the flow of the match in the middle of a series of moves in their attempt to make me look

ridiculous. They would try to get cute and get me out of rhythm.

The reason they would do that was simple. They wanted to make themselves look good in front of their hometown crowd, the promoter, or their wife or girlfriend,. They thought they could get over by embarrassing the champion. Unfortunately for them, the results were never what they had hoped for. Nothing ticked me off more than to have some guy, who could barely find his way to the ring, try me out. Whenever they did, it didn't last very long.

Whenever one of my opponents got cute, I would stretch them. I would clamp on a hold that caused them a great deal of pain. Usually, it only took a couple of seconds to get their attention. I never took it the extreme, but it didn't take long for them to remember who the champion was and why.

I always enjoyed shooting in the ring with an opponent who could actually wrestle. It would

always be a lot of fun if I knew my opponent wanted to go at it for a while. It would bring added excitement to our match and added a lot of fun for the two of us. But if someone did it with the intent of embarrassing me, or if they thought they might be able to steal the title, that was an entirely different matter. If that was the case, the "shoot" didn't last more than a few seconds.

Lou Thesz told me about guys who tried to steal the title from him when he was the champion. They would try anything to get the belt away from him, even thought they had to have known they couldn't beat him. They would try to knock him out with a sucker punch when the match began. It never worked, and the guys who tried it regretted it in a hurry, and paid dearly for their attempted coup.

I wouldn't put up with any subterfuge in the ring, but at the same time, I was careful to not go overboard when I stretched someone who got out of hand. Danny Hodge was a guy who didn't put

up with any tomfoolery in the ring. You either did it his way, or he would remind you who the boss was, and in a manner you weren't likely to forget for a long time. However, Danny missed out on some opportunities because some of the promoters worried that if Danny didn't like someone, or if he took offense to something someone did, he would just beat the guy and end the match. I didn't want that kind of a reputation, so I sent my opponent a subtle, yet still painful, message.

One morning on television, I worked with an up-and-coming wrestler who would achieve a great measure of fame years later as a world champion in his own right … Bob Backlund.

Bob was little more than a fresh-faced kid when I first met him. He had won the 190-pound Division II NCAA championship as a junior at North Dakota State University. He always said his Division II title paled in comparison to my Division I title, stating the fact that I had to compete against larger schools and tougher opponents. As truly modest as

he is, Bob could not be more mistaken. A national title is a national title to me, and can only be earned through years of training and hard work.

Going into the national championship tournament, he had wrestled only nine matches, winning them all. With such a minimal amount of matches, Bob went into the tournament unseeded. He won the championship by defeating number-one-ranked Gary Maiolfi of Cal Poly, the national championship team.

Often, matches for a television taping are put together just before the taping begins. Neither Bob nor I knew we would be facing each other that morning, so we didn't have time to work out the details of the match. That probably was a good thing because Bob was unbelievably nervous and I was physically exhausted.

Most people don't realize what a powerful man Bob is. He was easily the strongest man I had ever faced. He wasn't as big as "Superstar" Billy

Graham, Ivan Koloff, or any of the others known for their strength, but he was every bit as strong, and then some. He was so new to the business that he would easily become very excited. We would have to calm him down so he didn't accidentally hurt someone. He would never try to stretch someone. He just had difficulty channeling his strength.

Bob also was a fitness fanatic. He could do the Harvard Step Test, where he would step up and down on a 45-cm. high step [which converts to about 17.71 inches] for more than an hour without tiring. Some nights before his matches, he would have to shower before he went into the ring because he had worked out so hard to get ready.

It wasn't unusual at all for the young guys to get nervous in certain high-profile situations. I think wrestling me on television that morning only added to Bob's apprehension.

We had a ten-minute match and I called the

spots. Given my exhaustion and Bob's nerves, I was glad it wasn't scheduled for a longer time period. The match ended when Bob had me in a pin position, but the time limit expired just before the referee brought his hand down to slap the mat for the third time. The match was declared a draw, Bob looked like a million dollars, and I looked like a champion who could very well have the shortest reign in history. It was perfect. That was just what we wanted to accomplish because Bob and I would meet again the following week, this time at the Omni with my title on the line and a one-hour time limit.

Bob and I sold out the Omni for our return match the next Friday, August 29, 1975, bringing in an attendance of 19,000 and, reportedly, another 15,000 fans were turned away. People were everywhere, wrapping around the Omni. Some of those who were turned away began to get a bit unruly, so the police had to call in extra security to disperse the crowd.

I wanted to have a good match with Bobby. It was his first opportunity to work a main event for the world heavyweight title and I remembered how well Junior had treated me when he gave me my first shot. Bob had been working his way up through the card and had been wrestling mid-card or semi-final matches. If we had a good match, it would help put him over and propel him into main events. I most certainly had been given help along the way and that was an opportunity for me to reciprocate.

The previous night, I had flown in from New Orleans after a match against Dick Murdoch, but I was relaxed and ready to go when I arrived at the Omni that night. When I walked into the dressing room, about 90 minutes before I was scheduled to enter the ring, Bob had already been in the dressing room for more than an hour doing squats, pushups, and his Harvard Step Test. Nobody worked out as hard as Bob. We would all be relaxing and saving our energy for the ring, while Bob was working out at full tilt for 60 to 90 minutes before a match.

The boys all ribbed me about having to face Bobby in the ring. They kidded me about how strong he was, his training regimen, and above all, how those factors kick in when he gets nervous ... like tonight. "You have to work with Bobby Backlund tonight?" they would ask. "I'm glad it's you and not me. He's too strong." By bell-time, I honestly believed Bobby was going to kill me.

Bob was so nice and polite to all of us. He was played up during the first part of his career and during his title run as a nice guy; the all-American Boy. That was how he really was, and he remains that way to this day. He wouldn't even say "damn" in front of me.

As always, it was quite a thrill to be the last person to walk to the ring and to hear the announcer introduce me as the world heavyweight champion. I was pleased with the match, and so was Bob, the promoters, and the fans. Our match was for one fall with a 60-minute time limit. I pinned Bob in about 40 minutes to retain the title

and I survived his adrenaline rush. When you work with someone like Bob — that is, when you have two wrestlers in the ring who have only two things in mind, to work a good match and to give the fans more than what they paid for — how can you avoid hitting a home run?

I kept Bob calm and controlled during the match. It was his first opportunity to wrestle in such a prestigious situation. Looking back, it hadn't been all that long ago that Ike Eakins and the Assassins worked to keep me calm, and controlled the match to make me look good. Bob did a wonderful job that night. He later told me, it was that match that helped his career move on to the next level. He would have done well, regardless, because he had so much raw talent. Bobby left the NWA and, in 1978, went to work for the WWF, where he held the WWF world title for nearly six years. That is a testament to his talent, tenacity, attitude, and skills, and it's nice to know he thought our match played a key role in his eventual success.

Later that night, Dusty Rhodes, Bill Watts, Gordon Solie, and I went out to a local restaurant to unwind, have a few drinks and to swap stories. As the hours passed by, we began drinking a little more and talking a little less, so we decided to drive around Atlanta to continue our celebration. We drove around Highway 285 that ran the circumference of Atlanta and found ourselves only a few blocks from Jim Barnett's condo. "Let's go see Jim and tell him about the show," I said. "We'll get him to come out with us."

Dusty and Bill heartily agreed. "Let's go."

Gordon was less than enthusiastic. "No way! Are you nuts? It's two o'clock in the morning. He will be furious. He may just get angry with you, but he sure as hell will fire me." We told Gordon to relax. We wouldn't let him get fired.

When we got to Jim's condo, there was a huge

guy — the door man I guess — sitting by the entrance to the elevator. He walked towards us and the four of us stopped in our tracks. The guy was as big as anyone I had ever seen in the ring and he didn't look like he was in a good mood. I'm sure he didn't want to have to deal with four slightly-inebriated wrestlers in such a posh setting as the lobby of Jim's condo. "We're here to see Jim Barnett," I told him.

"No, you're not," he replied. "It's after two in the morning, and if I let you through, he'll fire me."

Jim had that way of intimidating people. Everyone under his employ had, at one time or another, been concerned that he would give them the ax. I could sympathize with the guy. I vividly remembered his tirade when Billy Robinson and I arrived late and injured on the tour in Australia.

The door man stepped between us and the elevator when he recognized us. "You're those

wrestlers I see on TV, aren't you? I know you. Dusty, Jack Brisco, Bill Watts. And you, you're Gordon Solie. I can't believe it!" He paused for a minute before adding, "But you still can't go up."

As we all walked past him, I said, "If Jim gets after you, tell him you had no choice … because you don't."

"And keep away from that phone. We want this to be a surprise," Watts added.

I still feel bad about doing that to the poor guy. He did call Jim to alert him, but by the time he did, we were already banging on Jim's door.

All that time, Gordon was lagging behind, trying to talk us out of it and shaking his head, saying over and over that he was sure he was going to be fired.

"What do you want?" Jim yelled through the door.

"Come on, Jim. Open the door. We had a great night in the Omni and we want to tell you all about it. Come on! Have a drink with us."

He eventually opened the door and let us in, but he said, "I'll give you a drink ... to go."

We convinced him to let us stay and we talked for an hour as we laughed and told him what happened at the Omni. We all were having a good time, except for Jim, and Gordon, of course, who never said a word. Happily, both Gordon and the doorman kept their jobs. Jim wasn't a vindictive man, but to hedge our bets, we promised to never wake him again in the early hours of the morning.

Chapter 23
In Business for Myself

Before winning the world heavyweight title, the prospective champion was required to post a $25,000 bond with the NWA to ensure the title would be kept safe and returned when the title run was over. The world heavyweight wrestling championship was a valuable commodity. The governing body of the National Wrestling Alliance needed assurance that an individual wouldn't go rogue and defend the title on his own, drop the belt to someone else, or sell the belt to a promoter who hadn't been ordained by the board of directors of the NWA. If the world champion, of his own volition, dropped the title to someone who hadn't been approved by the NWA, he would lose his $25,000. Attempts to steal the title were rare when I had the belt, but it happened frequently in the first half of the twentieth century, so the bond was established to make sure the title stayed where

the NWA deemed it belonged.

The money was held in escrow and returned when the champion gave up the belt. When Lou Thesz first held the title, the bond was $10,000, but it grew to $25,000 by the time I was champion. I sent Sam Muchnick my bond money a few weeks before I took the title. I wasn't booked in St. Louis during that time, but my brother Gerry was, so I put the $25,000 cash in an envelope and Gerry gave it to him. The bond was paid in cash. I may have been the heir-apparent, but cash was king.

Everybody in the wrestling business wanted that title. There were many promoters who would sell their grandmother in return for having control of the belt and the champion under their employ. If there was a group of people, for whom the phrase "no honor among thieves" was coined, wrestling promoters was that group. There were some exceptions to that rule, but not many.

I understood the reasoning of the National

Wrestling Alliance, but I never could understand why they would choose a champion they didn't believe they could trust. In retrospect, it wasn't the champion the promoters didn't trust. It was each other.

The bond I posted only came into play one time when I held the title. In December 1974, about sixteen months into my title run, I was booked to defend the belt in Japan. Before I left, I received a phone call from Terry Funk. He said Giant Baba had called and wanted him to present me with a business proposition. "Jack, Baba wants the title and is willing to make a deal with you," he explained.

"So what?" I said. "Everybody wants the title. That's why we all got into this in the first place."

"But he's willing to pay you for it."

"How much is he willing to pay?"

"He said he would give you ten thousand dollars if you let him hold the belt for one week."

"I don't know, Terry," I responded.

"We could do it and not tell the NWA about it," said Terry. "Baba will return the belt at the end of that time and you'd be back in the States before Muchnick or anyone else hears about it. And even if they do get wind of it, we could claim you accidentally hit your head and were knocked out, so Baba had no choice other than to cover you and promised to return the belt by losing to you the following week."

I reminded Terry that I had $25,000 deposited with the NWA, the same amount Dory had posted when he was the champ. Baba was offering me $10,000 to lose $25,000. The deal could cost me fifteen grand and the title. I told Terry he had better negotiate a better money deal or it wasn't going to happen. Terry knew the business as well as anyone, and better than most. He knew I was

serious.

A few days later he called and said Baba was willing to give me more money. "How much?" I asked.

"He hasn't said," Terry replied. As I pressed the issue, he just kept hemming and hawing. "Jack, they promised to take care of you. Don't worry about your twenty-five thousand dollars," he said.

"I want to hear something specific, Terry. I want an exact number."

"I'll check with Baba and get back to you," said Terry.

"Listen, Terry, I'll do it for twenty-five thousand dollars, but only if Sam gives me the okay. I also want two thousand dollars a day for every day I'm in Japan, whether I'm working or not, and eight thousand dollars for each match with Baba. Plus, all expenses, in cash, American dollars, the minute I get off the plane."

Terry said he would take the deal to Baba, but he was sure Sam and the NWA board of directors would never go along with it. I told him, "I'll take care of the board. You just make the deal with Baba."

Terry and I both were surprised when Baba accepted my terms. I immediately set out to inform the board of my intentions. It would have been easy for me to take Funk's original deal, make a quick trip to Japan, and be in and out in a week with my belt and $25,000. No one would have been the wiser. But I wouldn't even consider it. It wasn't the way I was brought up and it wasn't the way I did business. Champion of the world or not, I was taught to be honest and to deal with others honestly. As far as I was concerned, there was no other way. The National Wrestling Alliance had put their faith in me as the champion and I wasn't going to let them down. Besides, being champion meant a lot more to me than just holding the belt. It was the same title Gotch, Stecher, Lewis, Hutton,

and Thesz held. I wasn't going to do anything that might tarnish it.

Baba had good reasons for wanting the title. One reason was ego. I can't fault him for that. Who in the wrestling business didn't have an ego and wouldn't want the opportunity, albeit for even a short period of time, to be the world heavyweight champion? There was another reason he wanted to be the world champion. No Japanese wrestler had ever held the National Wrestling Alliance version of the world heavyweight title, and a clean win over me for the belt would give him and his promotion instant credibility and an additional leg up on Antonio Inoki's rival promotion [New Japan Pro Wrestling].

I didn't know Baba well. In fact, I hardly knew him at all. I didn't even know he could speak English until a few years ago. When I worked for him, I never saw him socialize with the boys. I remember seeing him sitting in the corner of the dressing room, smoking cigars and playing

poker. Other than that, he was all business. Baba had it all — the money, the recognition, and everything that came along with the fame he had achieved.

Everything, that is, except the world title. Baba holding the title, even if only for a week, would give his company — All Japan Pro Wrestling — the credibility it would need to send them to the top of the wrestling industry in Japan. The only obstacle in his way was how to get the belt and who could broker the deal for him.

That's where Terry Funk came in. The Funks were business partners with Baba and were responsible for recruiting the American boys to wrestle for him in Japan. Together, they made All Japan Pro Wrestling the strongest promotion in the country.

After Baba gave Terry the go-ahead, I called the two most important men in the NWA, Sam Muchnick and Eddie Graham. I also made a call to

Jim Barnett, who was next in line to take over the presidency. I explained what I planned to do and, before any of them could object, I told them, "Look, I've done jobs for you for twenty-five dollars a night. Now I have an opportunity to do a job for twenty-five thousand dollars and I'm going to do it. Okay? I didn't have to tell you about it, but I wanted to be honest."

None of them had any objections. It's possible they might have objected if they thought they could have changed my mind, but the tone of my voice gave no indication there was any possibility of that happening. I was the champion and this was something just too good for me to pass up. I understand Baba did the same thing twice with Harley — in October 1979 and September 1980 — and I hope Harley did as well as I did.

The title switch was supposed to work like this: Baba and I were booked for three matches, each with a two-out-of-three fall stipulation. We would wrestle in Kagoshima on December 2, Tokyo on

December 5, and Toyohashi on December 8. He would win the first two matches, two falls to one, and in the final match, I would take back the belt. Several people warned me about a possible double cross, but I didn't consider that for a second. Baba was an honorable man and he knew the business. Besides, I could take the title back in the ring any time I wanted.

I left for Tokyo after a November 29 title defense against Paul Jones in Richmond, Virginia. Former world heavyweight champion Pat O'Connor went with me as my second. More importantly, I wanted him to watch the money. Pat had been a friend for a long time. He worked with me early in my career and I teamed with him quite a bit in St. Louis. When I received word I would be getting the title, Pat trained me and told me what to expect as champion. He had held the title for three years. No matter how much experience someone has in the ring, only those who have actually held the title can give you the insight or the knowledge on what to expect.

Few people were better than Pat in the ring. I believe he knew every hold, counter, and trick in the book. Pat gained fame in his native New Zealand as both a rugby player and an amateur wrestler. As a national wrestling champion, Pat soon entered the ring as a professional. He was spotted in the ring by Joe Pazandak, a wrestler from Minnesota, who wasted no time contacting another former world champion, Joe Stecher, who was then running the Minneapolis wrestling office with his brother, Tony. An instant hit with the crowd in both the United States and Canada, Pat brought his Irish good looks and mat skill to an entirely new set of fans. He won the Montreal version of the heavyweight title from Killer Kowalski on July 21, 1954, lost it back to Kowalski on November 10, regained it on March 9, 1955, and dropped it to Don Leo Jonathan on June 8.

Pat won the most prestigious version of the world title — the NWA world heavyweight championship — from Dick Hutton on January 9,

1959 in St. Louis. Pat also became the center point of one of the most controversial eras of our sport. As world champion, Pat defended his title nightly against the best the NWA had to offer, but another promotional group was looking to gain power and promote their main draw, Verne Gagne.

Wally Karbo, who promoted out of the Minneapolis office, issued an edict to O'Connor. O'Connor had three months to defend his title against Gagne or forfeit the belt. The NWA took a dim view of anyone telling their champion what to do and who he should wrestle. They ignored Karbo and his group and continued on with business as usual. The three-month time limit came and went with Gagne still waiting. The Minneapolis group pulled its recognition from Pat and awarded the title to Verne.

Pat held his title until June 30, 1961, when he lost it to "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers in Comiskey Park in Chicago in front of a then-record-crowd of

nearly 39,000 fans. Losing the title didn't slow him down. He was active in the ring until close to his death from cancer at the age of 66 on August 16, 1990. I could think of no better man to accompany me on my trip to Japan.

When we stepped off the plane in Tokyo on December 2, we were greeted by Baba's men, who handed me a satchel containing $25,000 in cash. Up until then, my biggest payday as champion had been $2,600, which was great money in '73 and '74, but $25,000 for one night's work was unheard of, not to mention the per diem, the fees for the three-match series, and the other matches I had scheduled in Japan.

Pat and I wrapped athletic tape around the bag and I signed my name all over it so I could tell if anyone tried to open it. As for the rest of the money I negotiated, I would pick that up at the end of my stay in Japan, as was the custom. We placed the bag in the hotel safe and left for Kagoshima, where I would drop the title to Baba. Kagoshima

is the capital city of Kagoshima Prefecture at the southwestern tip of the island of Kyushu, and the largest city in the prefecture by some margin.

I was informed that this would be Baba's eleventh title shot. He had challenged Buddy Rogers, Lou Thesz, Gene Kiniski, Dory Junior, and me on one other occasion. Ten months earlier, we both had been counted out during our match in Nagasaki on January 23, 1974.

Baba entered the ring first to thunderous, albeit polite, applause. He was their national hero and he was taking on the world champion from America.

Accompanied by Pat, and followed by Ken Mantel, who had defended the NWA world junior heavyweight title earlier on the card, I entered the ring next. I, too, received polite applause. When I went to a territory, I didn't go in as either a babyface or a heel. I simply wrestled and let the fans decide for whom they wanted to cheer.

If matches in Japan tend to lend themselves to formality, championship matches are even more so. Both Baba and I were led to the ring by a procession and given bouquets of flowers from beautiful Japanese women. I had O'Connor and Mantel in my corner, while Baba had the Sensational, Intelligent Destroyer [Dick Beyer] and four or five of his countrymen as seconds. Lord James Blears, president of the Pacific Wrestling Federation and the official delegate of the NWA in Japan, made the introductions that night. After the introductions, he unrolled a scroll and read a lengthy proclamation sanctioning the bout as a two-out-of-three-falls match for the heavyweight championship of the world. The bell finally rang and we were able to get down to the reason I had traveled more than halfway around the world.

Baba attacked first and we battled fairly evenly until we hit the twelve-minute mark when he whipped me into the ropes and hit me with a chop I felt all the way to my spine. Following up with a

drop kick and a Russian leg sweep, he pinned me to take the first fall. Pat and Ken dragged me back to the corner where I sat on the mat with my back against the turnbuckles. Baba stood in his corner listening to instructions from his corner.

When the bell rang for the second fall, Baba picked up where he had left off just three minutes before. He dropped me with a neck breaker that almost ended the match. I leaned more on my amateur moves than I had in the past, working on his legs to keep him off balance and to minimize the size differential. I managed to take him down with a back suplex. That was no easy task. Try to lift a seven-foot-four, 300-pound man after wrestling for more than a half an hour. It took most of the energy I had left. After the suplex, I spun around and clamped my figure-four leglock on him. He held on for 30 seconds or so, but finally conceded the fall.

The match was even. One fall apiece. It all came down to the third fall, as it so often does in

championship matches. Of course, that's why I was there … to let Baba "borrow" my title for a week.

The third fall began as you may have expected, with me going after his weakened leg and Baba keeping me at bay with his long reach and karate chops. I took him down and tried to lock in the figure four again. Baba kicked me in the chest, which sent me flying backwards, striking my head against the turnbuckle. That set up what the wrestling magazines reported as a "shock throughout the wrestling world." He picked me up, knee-lifted me, and locked in the Russian leg sweep. I managed to get a foot over the bottom rope and the referee forced him to break the hold. Baba lifted me to my feet, whipped me into the ropes, threw a flying clothes line, and pinned me for the third and deciding fall. Three minutes and 20 seconds into the third fall, Baba became the new world heavyweight champion.

The normally-reserved fans crowded the ring to

pay homage to the new champion. They cheered when Blears announced the time and handed the belt to Baba. His seconds lifted him up onto their shoulders (again, no easy task) as he lifted the belt over his head. I was still prone on the mat while the celebration was ensuing in the opposite corner. I slowly regained my feet, walked over to Baba, and shook his hand in a gesture of congratulations. I left the ring to a surprisingly large number of cheers. That was another thing about Japanese fans; win or lose, they appreciate a valiant effort and a great match. Baba remained in the ring for quite awhile, soaking up the spotlight and the applause, and that was to be expected. After all, he certainly had paid enough for it.

During that match, I received an injury I carry with me to this day; a scar just below my lower lip. When Baba arm-whipped me into the ropes, I was supposed to rebound off the ropes, hit him with a shoulder block, and knock him to the canvas. It worked as planned, except for one small

detail. When I hit Baba, the shoulder of his tall bony frame hit me in the mouth and jammed my lower lip into my lower teeth. My teeth went all the way through the flesh beneath my lip.

I didn't really feel the pain until after the match. That isn't unusual for an athlete in the heat of the battle. When you are in the "zone," you are so focused that, many times, injuries aren't noticed until after the match or game. I did feel the initial searing pain, but only for a moment. After the match, when I pushed my tongue against the inside of my lip to assess the damage, my tongue poked through to the outside.

It was pretty bad. That was my first night in Japan and I had ten days to go. As far as I saw it, I had two choices. I could go to the hospital and get it stitched up, or I could go back to the hotel, tend to it myself, and go to bed. I chose the latter. I wasn't about to go to a hospital in a foreign country and be stitched up by a doctor I didn't know. To begin with, I wasn't all that big on

needles. I put a piece of athletic tape over the cut like a giant band-aid. It worked pretty well. In fact, it worked well enough that the cut began to close up and heal by the next day.

In between my matches with Baba, I faced "The Sensational, Intelligent Destroyer," Jumbo Tsuruta, and other Japanese wrestlers in Baba's promotion. The matches were okay, but nothing great. I was pitted against some good workers, though, so they were entertaining. I played up the angle of the American, ex-world champion, hell-bent on regaining my belt before my tour was over.

Three days later, Baba and I met again, this time in Nihon University Hall in Tokyo. I entered the ring first, which was something I had not been accustomed to doing for some time. Since he was the champion, Baba entered last and looked every bit the confident champion. As the contender, I could wrestle more aggressively. Baba did a good job in that match and made me look better as the contender than I had just days earlier as

champion. Remember, part of the champion's job was to make the challenger look like a champion, and make it seem as if he could take the title at any time. As planned, Baba beat me again two falls to one.

On December 8, six days after I dropped the title to Baba, I faced him for the third time. More than 10,000 fans crowed into the Toyohashi Civic Center in Tokyo. The stage had been set for the rubber match and it turned out to be one of the best matches of my career. When the opening bell rang, I attacked Baba like there was no tomorrow. We battled toe-to-toe for almost fifteen minutes. He took the first fall with a backbreaker across his knee and covered me for the fall. Less than three minutes into the second fall, I made him concede to the figure four.

Not only did I want to take back my belt, but I wanted to do it in a convincing style. During the third fall, the fans broke from their reserved demeanor and began shouting, "Baba, Baba,

Baba!" He dropped me with back breakers and caught me in the Boston crab. I looked strong throughout the match and took the third and deciding fall with the "O'Connor roll-up," Pat's signature finishing maneuver. It was my way of thanking Pat for all the help he had been to me over the years. Three seconds later, I was the champion again. Baba congratulated me and I was ready to get back home.

The trip home was another matter. I didn't know it when I arrived in Japan, but you weren't allowed to bring more than $5,000 back into the States from overseas countries. I had quite a bit more than that. I thought wrestling Baba had been a challenge, but compared to what I had to do to get the money back into the country, the wrestling was the easiest part of the trip. I came up with the idea of taping the money across my stomach, legs, and any part of my body I could cover with my clothes.

The flight could not have been more nerve

racking. I sweated all the way from Tokyo to Honolulu, then to Los Angeles, and finally, to St. Louis. The closer I got to home, the more anxious I became. If I was stopped, it would look like I was a drug dealer or smuggler of some sort. All those thoughts kept racing through my head. When the plane touched down in St. Louis, I began to breathe again.

I had been in touch with Sam Muchnick before I left for my series with Baba, so he was aware of the plan and the payoff. With a three-hour layover in St. Louis, Sam met me at the gate to discuss the events in Japan and to collect his three percent of the gates. We walked to his car in the parking lot. It was the middle of December and it was freezing. I never was much for cold weather, so I wanted to make the transaction as quickly as possible. Sam eagerly awaited the envelope I was going to hand him. I already had counted out his three percent of the gate, which totaled about $700 or $800. I had put it into an envelope and into my back pocket. Sam opened the envelope, counted

its contents, and looked up at me. "This isn't my share. Where's the rest of it?" he asked.

"The rest of it?" I asked. "What the hell are you talking about, Sam? There is no rest of it. That's it. That's all you have coming."

"This is only three percent of the gate. Where is my cut of the twenty-five thousand dollar you got from Baba? I want my cut. After all, I put this deal together for you."

"What? Sam, you know I put this whole thing together, not you. I traveled across the world and I sweated and bled for this belt. You didn't. While I was fighting Baba, you were sitting at home here in St. Louis. You're lucky to be getting three percent of the gate. That's all you're getting."

With that, I got out of the car, slammed the door, and walked back into the terminal. I'm sure Sam sat there for awhile and brooded before he drove home. As I drove back to Tampa, I thought about

how I was getting more and more fed up with that aspect of holding the title. I loved Sam and I had the greatest respect for him — I still do, even fifteen years after he's been gone — but it was all about money, which can make you do and say things you wouldn't normally do.

As a rule, the promoters would send Sam's three percent directly to him by check and didn't go through me. There were about 30 territories in operation when I held the title. The only place I didn't wrestle was New York, which was run by Vince McMahon under the WWWF banner, and Verne Gagne's AWA territory in Minneapolis. I'm sure Sam, at times, made more money than I did.

Since Sam was booking me, as he had many of the world champions before me while he was president, the promoters worked hard to stay on his good side. He controlled the title, so if you were a promoter and you wanted the champion in your territory, you had to dance to Sam's tune. I respected Sam and trusted him, but I was the world

champion, and as agreeable as I tried to be, and as accommodating as I was to the promoters where the title was concerned, I wasn't much for dancing.

A week after I got home, I received a phone call at home from Dory Funk Jr. He told me Sam was upset and he thought I should give him more of the money I earned in Japan. "Look, Junior," I said, "If you want Sam to have more money, you give it to him out of your own pocket. He's gotten all he's going to get from me."

Dory didn't say anything else about it. Neither did anyone else, including Sam. I had had enough of promoters taking advantage of my own hard work. I found myself wondering whether or not having the belt was really worth it.

Two days after I got home, I hit the ground running and defended my belt all over the country.

Chapter 24
The "Undisputed" World Champion

It's important to note that, even though I was recognized as the world heavyweight champion of the National Wrestling Alliance, there were two more men who were also defending what they claimed to be the world title.

The National Wrestling Alliance traces its lineage back to April 3, 1908, the day Frank Gotch defeated George Hackenschmidt in Chicago. Throughout the years, many splinter groups would form and create their own "world" title, but by 1952, Lou Thesz had beaten everyone who made those claims. Lou had an amazing eight-year run with the belt and was considered by everyone to be the "definitive" champion.

That is, until June 14, 1957, when Lou defended his title against challenger Edouard Carpentier. Billed as the nephew of the famous fighter Georges Carpentier, who fought Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney in the 1920s, Carpentier's real name was Edward Wiecz. He gained a measure of fame as an acrobat in his native Poland and began wrestling in the early 1950s. Young and handsome, the "Frenchman" was a big drawing card during the early days of television.

Fred Kohler, the energetic promoter in Chicago, was pushing Ed and wanted to get him over even more than he already was. Fred and Lou were friends, so he asked Lou to lose a match and title to Carpentier, after which he would regain the title in a rematch within a few weeks. Lou agreed and lost the match to Carpentier. Thesz won the first fall and was "injured" during the second fall. Since Lou wasn't able to continue into a third fall, the referee stopped the match and awarded the win and the title to Carpentier. For some reason,

Kohler and Carpentier decided to renege on their promise to give Lou a rematch and avoided him at every turn, knowing Carpentier would pay dearly if Lou ever got him in the ring.

The NWA reversed the referee's decision and returned the title to Lou, stating the champion couldn't lose the title due to an injury, claiming it was akin to a disqualification. Carpentier and Kohler decided to continue defending the title and traveled the country, losing it in different territories, only to emerge as champion the following night in a different town. Tony Stecher, Wally Karbo and their promotional group that ran the territory, which included Nebraska, also ignored the NWA ruling and recognized Carpentier as their world champion.

I had one opportunity to wrestle Carpentier. It was towards the end of his career and eight months before the end of my title reign. We were booked in St. Louis on April 4, 1975 and I won by count-out in the third fall. It wasn't a great match, but it

was good enough.

Carpentier lost his version of the title when he met Gagne on August 9, 1958 in Omaha. Karbo remained loyal to the NWA, but continued to push Gagne towards an NWA title match. For five years, Wally tried to get Verne a title match with whoever the NWA champion was at the time. I am sure politics played a great part in those decisions because, regardless of his promotional affiliations, if anyone deserved a shot at the title, it was Verne. Although Gagne held the Nebraska version of the title, they still threw their recognition of the world title to O'Connor. They only had one stipulation — Pat had to defend his NWA belt against Verne within 90 days. When the 90 days had elapsed and no contract was signed, the newly-formed AWA removed its recognition from Pat and gave Gagne the world title by acclamation. The NWA, of course, did not go along with the upstart promotion and its self-serving decision. There were now two world heavyweight champions, with one more to come.

When I was champion, there was a lot of talk of a "Super Bowl" of wrestling. Magazines pushed the idea of a round-robin tournament between the three major claimants to the world heavyweight championship, with the winner to be the "undisputed" heavyweight champion of the world. That was done strictly to sell magazines. I seriously doubt the heads of the various wrestling governing bodies ever discussed the idea. Why would any group want to relinquish its portion of the title and all the money that came with it?

The closest I came to wrestling the AWA champion was after I lost the NWA title. The AWA version of the title had passed through many hands and was now in the possession of Nick Bockwinkel. Nick called me in Tampa and asked if I would be interested in coming up to Minnesota and working a program with him for the AWA title. He tried to convince me that it would be a perfect fit — the former two-time NWA world heavyweight champion on the quest to gain the AWA title.

I actually gave it some serious thought, but I thought better of the idea. There really was only one factor that kept me from accepting Nick's offer; the weather. I just had no interest in working a territory — Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Denver — that had weather that cold. It would have been fun, but to trade Miami for Milwaukee in the dead of winter was not something I was willing to do, no matter what the payoff.

There was one more claimant for the world title to come and, as history would have it, Lou Thesz was involved. The series of events that unfolded would cumulate some 30 years later, with one of the largest sports and entertainment industries the world has ever known — World Wrestling Entertainment.

When Pat O'Connor lost his belt to Buddy Rogers in Chicago on June 30, 1961, it was one of the most highly-touted championship matches of modern times. Buddy was, without a doubt, one of the greatest showmen, if not the greatest showman,

who has ever graced the ring.

Born Herman "Dutch" Rohde, Buddy took his ring name from film star Charles "Buddy" Rogers, the brother of silent-film star Mary Pickford. As colorful as he was, Rogers was just as much an innovator. He is credited with creating the atomic drop, as well as my signature hold, the figure-four leglock.

During the two and a half years Buddy held the NWA title, he began to spend most of his time in the Northeast and would rarely venture out of the area to defend the belt. That didn't sit well with the rest of the promoters across the country, who paid their dues annually to have the world champion on their cards a certain number of times during the year. Coupled with the fact that the New York wrestling trust, controlled by promoter "Toots" Mondt (not a popular or trusted colleague), had control of Rogers and the title, the NWA board members went shopping for a new champion.

They all agreed there was only one place to look. Their search began and ended at the doorstep of five-time world champion Lou Thesz. They wanted a man they knew they could trust to take the title worldwide, and not remain in the Northeast. Also, if Buddy refused to drop the belt, they were convinced Lou would have no trouble in taking the title for real. Buddy and Lou met in the ring on January 24, 1963 in Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto. It was sanctioned as a special one-fall match, with Lou pinning Buddy in what was, according to Lou, a lackluster affair.

The New York group was not about to give up its hold on the world title that easily. Buddy was the greatest draw it had ever seen and they needed him as champion. Even though he had been cleanly pinned by Thesz, Mondt and his group still recognized Rogers as champion because, as they claimed, all world title matches had to be two out of three falls. Since the Thesz match was only one fall, the victory didn't count, even though Lou now had the belt and Buddy's $25,000 bond had been

returned.

Around that time, Bruno Sammartino was making a name for himself in the Northeast. World War II, Bruno grew up in Pittsburgh and began wrestling as a teenager. With New York having such a high concentration of Italians and others who came to America in search of freedom and a better life, he was tailor-made for the territory. Bruno not only got over with his youth and strength, but with his manners and gentlemanly demeanor outside the ring.

With Buddy's career winding down and Bruno's on the rise, the match between the two was set on May 16, 1963 in the old Madison Square Garden. In front of nearly 20,000 fans, Bruno wrested claim to the world title from Rogers in a mere 48 seconds. The Sammartino era began and ran until 1971, when Bruno lost the World Wide Wrestling Federation title to the "Russian Bear," Ivan Koloff.

Koloff held the belt for a mere three weeks and dropped the title to Puerto Rican star, Pedro Morales. Pedro was the champion when I took the NWA world title, but as far as I was concerned, and most of the world, as well, I held the only real claim to the heavyweight championship of the world.

The WWWF [World-Wide Wrestling Federation, now the WWE] champion received more coverage in the magazines than either Verne or I, simply because most of the wrestling magazines were published in New York and the surrounding area, so they had easier access to the boys in the area. Most of the stories they printed were made up, anyway, so it didn't matter all that much. The editors would get photos of matches from all over the world and make up the copy that went along with them. It was not very accurate reporting, but I'm sure they sold a lot of magazines.

I first met Bruno in New York when I did a one-shot tag match at Madison Square Garden with

Eddie Graham. His gentlemanly manner was no gimmick. He was truly a nice guy. He had a second run as champion when he defeated the man who took the title from Morales, Stan Stasiak, after a week-long reign. When we met, Bruno had not yet won the title back from Stasiak, and Race had not lost to me in Houston.

I thought a match between Bruno and I would surely draw a sellout crowd. He had wrestled Harley for the NWA title in St. Louis at Kiel Auditorium to a near sellout crowd. They did so well in their hour draw that I was certain Bruno and I going title-versus-title would be one of the most anticipated matches in the history of wrestling.

After the matches in the Garden, Bruno, Eddie, Joe Scarpa (who was wrestling at the time as Chief Jay Strongbow), and I went to an Italian restaurant after it closed; we ate spaghetti and drank red wine until the early hours of the morning. We got along well and stayed in touch

occasionally as the years passed, so when I took the NWA title and Bruno regained the WWWF title, I approached him with the idea of a title-versus-title match. He liked the idea. I proposed we wrestle in the Omni in Atlanta and do an hour broadway or a double count-out.

He took the idea to Vince McMahon Sr. and, much to my surprise, Vince gave his approval. As we made plans for the momentous event, McMahon had second thoughts and pulled the plug on the idea. I think he was afraid something might go amiss down south where I was the favorite and there were far too few Italian fans.

Bruno and I were both disappointed. It would have been a great match and a lot of fun. The payoff would have been huge, but we both knew the business far too well to get our hopes too high. Years later, title-versus-title matches became very popular as Harley wrestled "Superstar" Billy Graham and Bob Backlund (both were WWWF champions), and Ric Flair met both

Backlund and AWA champion Rick Martel in the ring.

Chapter 25
Like a Moth to a Flame

One territory that exploded while I was champion was the Mid-Atlantic. It had been a hotbed of wrestling in the 1960s, but with the death of Jim Crockett Sr., the territory floundered under the guidance of his son Jimmy Junior. The only thing that saved the promotion was one of its former stars; one half of the Flying Scott Brothers, George Scott. Scott arrived in Charlotte in the early '70s. Not only did he pull wrestling out of the ashes and make it the hottest ticket in town, he made it the hottest promotion in the country.

A native of Hamilton, Ontario, George actually was born in Scotland while his parents were visiting their homeland on vacation. Having wrestled on the amateur mats since the age of thirteen, George turned pro in 1948 when he was just eighteen. During his travels around the

country, Scott learned the business from the inside by wrestling and learning from many of the greats of the day — Lou Thesz, Buddy Rogers, Gorgeous George, Billy "Whipper" Watson, and a list of others that reads like a who's who of the ring.

In 1953, George teamed with his brother Sandy [Angus] and they held the world tag-team title twice, as well as several other regional titles. He and Sandy were top card in the Carolinas for years, facing such notorious teams as the Great Bolo and Bolo [Tom Renesto and Joe Hamilton], Mike and Doc Gallagher, Rip Hawk and Swede Hanson, Bronko Lubich and Aldo Bogni, Gene and Ole Anderson, Brute Bernard and Skull Murphy, and The Infernos [Frankie Cain and Rocky Smith]. Leaving the Carolinas, George toured Texas, where a ring injury put him on the sidelines. John Ringley, Crockett's brother-in-law, called Scott and asked him to move back to Charlotte and see if he could help breathe some life into the once-thriving, and now near-comatose, territory.

Scott had tried his hand, quite successfully, at booking while working with Stu Hart's Stampede Wrestling in the wilds of Calgary, Alberta. When George took over the booking chores in Charlotte, he quickly realized the only way to save the territory was to, in his words, "kill it." George allowed the territory to languish for a short time with almost no talent, and then began to rebuild it by bringing in top talent.

Never in their most wild dreams did the fans think they would ever see superstars of the caliber George brought to their arenas.

If thinking small is a disease, then George Scott has to be the healthiest man alive. The top singles title in the territory had always been the old Southern heavyweight title, and it had been retired since 1969 when the Missouri Mauler was champion. In 1970, a new title was introduced with the Mauler as the first champion. On October 13, it was announced on television that he had won the title from Pat O'Connor in New

York. Obviously, that was one of the "phantom," or "fictitious," title matches that seemed to come up now and then in the territories. When George took over in October 1973, my brother Gerry held the title.

I first won the Eastern title in 1971, taking it from the Mauler, but gave it up in April 1972 when my bookings across the country began to grow. Rip and I had swapped the title once already, so they contrived a story of how he had beaten me for the title in Puerto Rico. (Puerto Rico probably was the site of many phantom title changes during that era) That never made sense to me because there would be no reason for me to defend the title in Puerto Rico, but nobody questioned it, so the story stuck. The fact that Gerry was in the territory was a boon for George Scott because it set up a program between Rip and Gerry. Gerry vowed to "uphold the honor of his brother" and regain the title for the Brisco family. Gerry swapped the title back and forth a couple of times with Rip and also lost it to Ole Anderson for a two-month period in

May 1973.

On September 6, 1973, Gerry was presented with the new "Mid-Atlantic" heavyweight championship belt and the old Eastern title was retired. The Mid-Atlantic title became the crown jewel of the territory. I held the Eastern title twice — once in 1971 and once in 1972 — and won and lost the new Mid-Atlantic title four times in 1982. When Gerry won the title, it became more important than the "Eastern" title had ever been. The credibility the Mid-Atlantic champion had was unbelievable.

One of George's first decisions was to bring in none other than the "Hammer," Johnny Valentine. Scott knew that wherever Valentine appeared, other stars were sure to follow. He introduced the "if you build it, they will come" concept long before the film "Field of Dreams" appeared on movie screens. Like a moth drawn to the flame, top wrestlers came in droves to Crockett Promotions. In no time Paul Jones, new stars began to take the place of the old tried-and-true

veterans: Ivan Koloff, Wahoo McDaniel, Super Destroyer [Don Jardine], Ken Patera, Dusty Rhodes, Blackjack Mulligan, and a young rookie named Ric Flair.

In January 1974, Gerry relinquished the title when he was booked to wrestle in Japan. I don't know how it got started, but another story going around was that Gerry had been injured during a match with Johnny in Charleston, South Carolina, on December 28, 1973. Either way, the belt was awarded to Johnny Valentine. It took more than six months for Johnny to really get over in the Carolinas, but with the new Mid-Atlantic belt and a long line of top contenders, George Scott and Jim Crockett Promotions were off and running.

The major North Carolina stops in the Mid-Atlantic territory included Charlotte, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Raleigh. In South Carolina, the main towns were Charleston, Columbia, Greenville, and Spartanburg. Richmond and Norfolk, Virginia were also on the circuit, as well

as dozens of small and mid-sized towns in-between.

That was what made Crockett's territory such a hot spot for wrestling. Imagine Johnny Valentine and the Super Destroyer wrestling in a small town that may have had only one convenience store. When a card was held in a small town, it would draw people from all the small towns surrounding it, so attendance on any given night often exceeded the population of the town in which they were wrestling. World-famous athletes battling for the Mid-Atlantic, or at times, the world title, in Anderson, South Carolina, was the key to the promotion's success. That had never been done before, and the fans showed their appreciation by filling the gyms, auditoriums, and arenas for every show.

Another quality that made George different from so many other bookers is that he would come up with an idea for an angle or a finish, and he would then ask the boys involved in the match for their

ideas. If their input had merit, he would incorporate it into the match. Other bookers simply created a finish they wanted done and acted like they were movie directors ... Do it this way, or that, and then go home. George wanted to put out the best product possible and he knew he needed more than just one person's thinking to do it. It was no wonder that, during my reign as champion, the Mid-Atlantic was the territory where people wanted to work. It was loaded with talent from top to bottom.

When he left the Mid-Atlantic territory, George repeated his success by building the Von Erich dynasty in the Texas World Class Wrestling promotion. However, in his fabled and many-faceted career, he will always be remembered, as well as anything he has done for wrestling, for helping Vince McMahon Jr. build the World Wrestling Entertainment company in its early days.

George went to work for the then-WWF in 1983 and commenced to take wrestling in a new

direction. He negotiated with Dick Ebersol at NBC to bring wrestling back to national network television for the first time in nearly 30 years. It was so popular, in fact, that it took the spot normally reserved for Saturday Night Live reruns from 1985 to 1992, and occasionally replaced the show itself during that time period.

A little known fact about George is that he was the one who came up with the name WrestleMania for the WWE's flagship pay-for-view event. Vince wanted to name it the "Colossal Tussle." George had the foresight and good sense to convince Vince to reconsider and to offer up the name WrestleMania. Vince agreed … and wrestling history was made. I have to go along with George. I can't see millions of fans paying their cable providers to see a three-hour extravaganza called the "Colossal Tussle."

I am proud to have known George for many years and to call him and his lovely wife, Jean, our friends. He lives just across the bay from me and,

even living so close, I see him far too seldom. He stays busy on the golf course, deep-sea fishing, and taking care of his rental condos on Indian Rocks Beach. He also is involved with many charitable events, and had a hand in the creation of the Eblen Charities in western North Carolina, a charity that works with children, adults and families living with illnesses and disabilities. It is easy to see that much more than just the wrestling industry is better off because of George Scott.

There is someone else who helped lead the Mid-Atlantic territory into prominence. I purposely left his name off the earlier list; not because there wasn't much to say, but because there is so much to say about him. His given name was Ed, but sports fans worldwide knew him simply as Wahoo.

Wahoo McDaniel's legend began early, long before he rose to fame on the gridiron as an offensive and defensive end for Bud Wilkinson's University of Oklahoma Sooners. Originally from Bernice, Louisiana, Wahoo moved to Texas as a

young boy and settled in Midland with his family. The name Wahoo came to him honestly. In his childhood, everyone called him "Little Wahoo" so as not to confuse him with his father, Hugh, who was known as "Big Wahoo."

Wahoo excelled at every sport that caught his interest. In the 1950s, he was the star catcher of the Pony League baseball team from Midland, the team that advanced to the Texas state title. Little Wahoo was not the only member of the team who would go on to make a name for himself in the years to follow. The coach of the team that season was a little known Texas oilman, George Herbert Walker Bush, who became the 41st president of the United States. The president fondly remembered Wahoo in a Sports Illustrated article as a "wonderful kid who captured the imagination of west Texas in the 1950s. He was idolized by everyone that knew him." Coming from the president of the United States, that's quite a recommendation, especially for a kid who had not yet reached his sixteenth birthday. But that is what

nearly everyone who came in contact with Wahoo thought. He would just breathe in life and take others along for the ride.

I always was a bit in awe of Wahoo, but I also felt a close kinship to him long before I ever met him. Wahoo and I came from the same tribe; the Chickasaw-Choctaw Nation. Growing up, I made sure that every time the name Wahoo McDaniel came up, everyone was made aware of that fact. In my opinion, and one that is shared well beyond the borders of Oklahoma, Wahoo was of the greatest athletes of our generation — a Jim Thorpe, of sorts.

He later became famous in Oklahoma for his prowess on the football field, and his legend grew from his outrageous antics away from it. He once ran from Norman, Oklahoma to Chickasha on a bet. It was a distance of 36 miles and he did it without stopping in six hours. Sooner fans got word of the event and lined the nearly 40-mile stretch of road to cheer him on. He collected $185

in wagers from his teammates and a mythical status that resonates to this day.

By his own admission, he never would turn down a bet. He once was challenged to drink a quart of motor oil. Undaunted, he drank only a few tablespoons before he got sick. He may not have won the bet, but he sure got a lot closer than anybody else would have. That oil episode might answer a lot of his opponents' questions on why they weren't able to keep him on the mat. He once told me that after the oil wager, when he worked out at the gym, he could feel the oil oozing out of his pores. He would laugh when he told the boys he smelled like an old pickup he once had owned.

McDaniel graduated from Oklahoma in 1960, the same year the upstart American Football League began. He left OU with two records; a 91-yard punt and an 86-yard touchdown pass. Initially drafted by the Houston Oilers, he started as guard and helped lead the Oilers to an AFL championship over the Los Angeles Chargers. The

following year, he moved on to the Denver Broncos as a linebacker and, in 1964, played for the New York Jets, where he shared the field with Joe Namath. The football fans at Shea Stadium would chant, "Wa-Hoo, Wa-Hoo." Wahoo was the only man in NFL history to have his first name, or nickname if you want to be technical, on the back of his jersey.

He later moved on to Miami to play for the new Dolphins franchise. It was during his time there that he made a decision that would bring him to a level of fame and fortune he never thought possible in football.

After his first year with the Oilers, he met wrestler and promoter, Joe Blanchard, who was looking for an Indian star. Don Eagle, the premier Indian wrestler who had once held a version of the world title, was ill at the time and wasn't able to wrestle. When Joe asked Wahoo if he might be interested in trying wrestling, Wahoo said, "Why not?" He was sent to Indianapolis to train with Jim

Barnett. He began his new career in 1961 and, by 1966, he was making more in the ring during the off-season than he did on the football field during the regular season.

Many NFL players have tried their hand in the ring, but only a few succeeded. Most of them didn't stay around long enough to see if it would work out. Wahoo readily declared that the ring was far more difficult and physically taxing than the gridiron.

An avid golfer, Wahoo played with the likes of Lee Trevino and various stars of the sports and entertainment world. He did have a temper on the links, especially when he would miss an easy shot. George Scott tells the story of one afternoon when they were playing in Texas. Wahoo missed an easy put and went nuts. He took his bag of clubs and threw them into a small lake next to the green. In a minute or two, sanity returned, and Wahoo and George looked at the bag floating out of their reach. Wahoo turned to his caddy and

offered him $50 to swim out into the lake to retrieve his waterlogged bag. The little Mexican caddy gladly accepted the cash, took off his shoes, rolled up the legs of his trousers, and waded out into the ankle deep water. He returned the clubs to Wahoo without getting anything more than the lower half of his legs wet. George laughed all the way to the clubhouse, while Wahoo cussed a blue streak that probably still hangs over the golf course.

I first met Wahoo in 1966 when I wrestled him in Lubbock, Texas, on April 20. His star had been on the rise for some time and my star was still somewhere over the horizon. Two and a half years would go by before we met up again, this time in 1968 in Florida. We became instant friends, but as time went on, we became friendly rivals as we both were chasing after the same goal; the heavyweight title of the world.

When I won the title, Wahoo had been a main event talent for many years; not only in the

Carolinas, but everywhere in the world. He may not have looked the part in the ring, with that little paunch he carried around, but he was as tough as they came. He was a superior athlete who knew only one way to wrestle, and that was 100 percent straight ahead. If Wahoo wasn't in a class by himself, it didn't take long to call the roll.

I was the first Native American to hold the NWA world heavyweight title and Wahoo was determined to be the second. I wore a small arrowhead on my trunks to honor my heritage, while Wahoo entered the ring, much like Strongbow, in full Indian headdress. It gave us both a comparison and a contrast in the ring; two Indian boys from Oklahoma battling for the crown of the wrestling world. The fans loved our matches and so did we.

Wahoo had many moves and maneuvers, but he was best known, and feared for, his tomahawk chop. He would hit me so hard that he would break the skin on my chest. He also is the reason

my nose looks like it does; kind of spread all over my face. I don't mind it, though. It's a badge of honor, like a cauliflower ear. Strongbow, who is prone to giving everyone of his friends a nickname, affectionately calls me "Crooked Nose," thanks to Wahoo.

On October 7, 1975, I defended the world title against Wahoo in Raleigh, North Carolina. Halfway through the match, he potatoed me squarely in the nose with a head-butt and knocked me out cold.

A potato, in wrestling parlance, is a punch, kick, head-butt, or any other blow that isn't a working blow; one that lands with force as if you were in a real fight. Potatoes happen in almost every match. In a physical sport like ours, it's almost inevitable, no matter how hard you try to avoid it. Usually, you ignore them, but if you get too many or they are too forceful, you feel obliged to issue a "receipt." That is, hit them back with a potato of your own.

When I regained consciousness from Wahoo's potato, I was lying face down on the mat in a pool of my own blood. When I stood up, I went after Wahoo and pushed him into a corner of the ring. Wahoo grabbed me and asked, "Jack! Jack! Are you okay?"

"No," I answered. "You almost killed me."

"I'm sorry, Jack. I'm sorry," Wahoo said, and then … WHACK! He hit me in the nose again.

After we finished the match, I went back into the dressing room. I never realized that such a small part of my body, like a nose, could hurt as much as it did. I went into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and snapped my nose back into place. I managed to hold back a cry of agony, but I think people could hear the crack all over Dorton Arena.

One great town that drew well for Wahoo and me was Asheville, North Carolina. Asheville is a beautiful town in the middle of the Smoky

Mountains with a population of about 200,000 people. What made it such a great place for us was that it was only an hour or so away from Cherokee, and a large population of the Cherokee Tribe.

The Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation came from brave and stalwart souls who hid in the mountains back in the early 1800s when President Andrew Jackson displaced the tribe and marched them to Oklahoma on the infamous "Trail of Tears." There was only one thing the fans in Asheville loved more than wrestling … and that was Wahoo. Whenever he was on the card there, it would be a sell-out with a great portion of the crowd from Cherokee.

Asheville had been a great wrestling town since the 1940s. They ran weekly shows there every Wednesday night until the mid-seventies, at which time they changed to the once-a-month shows on Sunday. The show there would begin at three o'clock in the afternoon. That meant two things;

the main event usually would begin about 5:30, which gave the crowd enough time to make the Sunday evening church service, and that we would have to wrestle on another show in another town. After Asheville, we would head for the Omni in Atlanta, or sometimes the Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto.

Asheville has a great literary history as F. Scott Fitzgerald, O. Henry, and Carl Sandberg all lived there or nearby. Famous sportsmen also appeared there, including baseball legends Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth. Jack Dempsey even trained in nearby Hendersonville for a time to prepare for a September 23, 1926 defense of his world heavyweight boxing title against Gene Tunney in Philadelphia. It has quite a legacy for such a small, yet beautiful, mountain town.

On July 20, 1975, Wahoo pinned me in the middle of the ring. When the referee handed him the belt and raised his hand, I thought the Civic Center would explode. The ring announcer

announced, "The winner … and new world heavyweight champion … Wahoo McDaniel!" While that was going on, I scooted over towards the ropes and placed my foot on the bottom strand. When the referee glanced down at me, he saw my foot over the rope … and disallowed the fall, thinking my foot had been on the bottom rope when the pinfall had taken place. As he was trying to get Wahoo's attention and tell him the match was still in progress, I came up from behind him and rolled him up with a "schoolboy" press. The referee counted one-two-three and McDaniel lost by pinfall … while he was holding the belt. Meanwhile, the crowd was standing at ringside four or five deep. When they announced I was the winner and had retained my title, Wahoo and I thought the fans were going to tear the ring down to get to me and the referee. I whispered to Wahoo, "Let's get out of here." I never was so glad to get to the confines of the dressing room in all my life. I owe a debt of gratitude to the officers of the Asheville police department who were working security that day.

The rematch the next month took place on October 6, and the fans waiting to buy tickets were lined up around the building. Towards the end of the match, when I was in clear danger of being pinned by Wahoo and losing my title, my brother Gerry came running up to the ring, crying foul-play to the referee. When he climbed up onto the ring apron, Wahoo went after him. Meanwhile, I diverted the referee's attention. As Wahoo prepared to nail Gerry with his tomahawk chop, I pushed him into the ropes from behind and pinned him with the "O'Connor roll up." Pushing him into the ropes also sent Wahoo into Gerry, who flew backwards off the apron and into the front row so the official didn't see his interference. After my hand was raised, Gerry came into the ring to congratulate me. Wahoo, furious, chased Gerry and me out of the ring and we headed back to the dressing room. The ring announcer proclaimed me as the winner and still champion, while Wahoo stood in the ring with the fans chanting his name. Once again, I left with the belt, but Wahoo was the crowd favorite and uncrowned champion. He lost

the match, but he still was the champion in their eyes. He was great.

Wahoo is another man who would have made a great world champion. He won more than his share of regional and world tag team titles, but he was a bit wild outside the ring. As they had with Johnny Valentine, NWA powers generally steered clear of anyone they thought might be a problem, no matter how well they drew. However, Wahoo didn't need the title to get over or to draw money. He did that in every territory he worked without the belt. He was that big of a drawing card.

I never heard anyone anywhere who had anything unkind to say about Wahoo. He always had time for the fans and would arrive early to a town to work in the ring with the new boys, demonstrating holds and sharing his knowledge of the ring. Not many wrestlers who had achieved the level he had would take the time to help out the preliminary and mid-card boys, but that was Wahoo, and he never

expected any recognition for his efforts.

Wahoo was married five times, and though he may not have been an ideal husband all the time, he was one of the most devoted fathers I have ever seen. He and his son, Zac, were all but inseparable. Even at the end of his life, while awaiting a kidney transplant, he took Zac to wrestling tournaments to watch him compete. In fact, his ex-wife and Zac's mother, Karen, offered one of her kidneys, but sadly, it wasn't a match. He was on dialysis for four and a half years before he died, still waiting for a kidney. He passed away on April 19, 2002 in Houston, where he was living with his daughter. He was 63 years old.

Chapter 26
Two Tens and a Five

It would have been great if all territories had been as well-run and full of top talent as the Mid-Atlantic area, but very few were. Florida, Houston, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Toronto; all were good areas that would draw well, no matter who I wrestled. Places like Tennessee, Alabama, Kansas City, and Oregon, however, were extremely poor. But poor or not, it was my job to go there and defend the world title.

That was another big difference between the NWA belt and those of the rival AWA and the WWF. One night, I would be wrestling in St. Louis in front of thousands of people, and the next night, I would be in St. Joseph in front of hundreds.

In the American Wrestling Alliance, most, if not all, of Gagne's cards would be in larger cities like

Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Denver. Morales, and later Bruno, would defend the WWF title in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. There weren't many small crowds in those areas. Believe it or not, I didn't mind going to the smaller towns at all. If I was the champion of the world, I was the champion of the entire world, and that included Mobile, Alabama, as well as Miami.

Mobile was in the middle of one of the worst territories in the country, and serves as the only city in which I missed a title defense during my two-and-a-half-year run as champion. Even though the Mobile territory was weak, it did have its bright spots — those being two of its top stars, Ken Lucas and Jimmy Golden, and the promoter Lee Fields.

I defended my title against Lucas and Golden throughout Alabama and Tennessee. Both of them were talented workers and our styles matched up well. Fields did everything he could to build the territory. He respected the boys and did well by

them in payoffs.

To get to Mobile by air, there was only one way; the illustrious Southern Airways. One day, I was on a flight headed to Mobile to defend my title against Jimmy Golden. As we were descending on Mobile, I looked at my watch and thought I had something I hadn't had in quite a while — extra time. The plane was scheduled to land around five o'clock in the afternoon, which would give me ample time to rent a car, check into my hotel, and get to the arena early, about eight o'clock. For once, I had a little breathing room before the battle began. While I was thinking that, I noticed we flew over the Mobile airport, made something akin to a U-turn, and flew back over the airport in the other direction.

After the second pass, the pilot appeared from the cockpit and walked down the aisle with a metal rod that resembled a crowbar. He stopped about halfway towards the end of the plane, pulled up a piece of the carpet, and removed a section of the

fuselage. He took the metal rod he was carrying and began to hit something beneath the floor. He struck it about a dozen times or so. At first, he worked slowly and methodically. When that didn't seem to do any good, he began to hit it harder and more rapidly. He eventually stopped, replaced the piece of the floor and carpet, and walked back to the cockpit, crowbar still in hand. We all just sat there in silence. The pilot leaving the controls and coming back to beat on something beneath the floor could not be good. As we sat there, contemplating our collective fate, his voice came over the loud speaker:

"This is your pilot. I am sure most of you may have noticed that I came back to the coach area and was hitting something beneath the floor. I don't want anyone to worry, but the left landing gear is stuck and it won't descend and lock into place. The right one is fine, but we can't land on only one wheel. We are going to return to Memphis. They have the capability to handle situations like this. Mobile doesn't have the

equipment for us to land safely there. We have plenty of gas, but we have to run most of it out to be sure of a safe landing."

The pilot seemed calm, as if that kind of a thing happened all the time. Who knows? Maybe it did with Southern Airways. But commonplace or not, none of the passengers on the flight were feeling too confident. The pilot came back to the coach area and explained that there was nothing to worry about, and then proceeded to herd the passengers to the wing section of the plane. Everyone, that is, except for me. The pilot took me to the back of the plane and pointed out a lever that controlled the rear emergency exit. He told me to hold onto it because, upon landing, there was a good chance the plane would go into a spin. When the plane stopped spinning, I was supposed to pull the lever on the tail gate and "get the hell out of here."

There we sat; 30 strangers on their way to a small town in Alabama — only God knows why — all huddling together and praying we would all walk

out together on the tarmac in Memphis. Seconds before we were to land, both of the landing gears descended, but only the right one locked into place. Somehow, that was enough. There were police cars, fire engines, foam spreaders, and all sorts of emergency personnel lining both sides of the runway, but none of the precautions were needed. I don't know who the pilots were, but they landed that plane, crippled landing gear and all, as softly as a feather landing on a pillow. We didn't feel the wheels hit the runway at all. We simply rolled to a stop. To this day, I don't know how the pilots managed to land the plane so skillfully, but they did so to the unending gratitude of their flight crew and their passengers.

I wish I could tell you that was the end of the story, but it's not. I had completely forgotten about the match, but there was just enough time to make it to Mobile for the main event if I was able to catch another flight. We all walked into the terminal together (an interesting name for the building, I thought, after what we had been through), and

walked up to the Southern Airways counter. The guy behind the ticket counter could not have been less accommodating. He acted so pompously and arrogantly towards us that it all the more magnified what we had just gone through. He told us the kind folks at Southern Airways had most generously provided a van to take us all to Mobile (more than 350 miles). He offered no apology or showed the slightest bit of concern for what had just happened to us, his customers.

It was far too late for me to make my match traveling by van. I told the guy at the counter I had to be in Mobile by eight o'clock that evening for a business meeting. I asked him if there was another flight that might get me to Mobile on time. He let me know once again, and in no uncertain terms, that the van was the only transportation available to us, and we should be happy they were offering that.

I all but lost it at that point. I was trembling from being on the plane, and in my anger, I was finding

it more and more difficult to speak. I told him since that was the case, could I just get a hotel room and a ticket back home to Atlanta? He said the company would not put me — or any of the other passengers, for that matter — up for the night, and they most certainly were not going to give me a free ticket back to Atlanta. If I wanted a room or a flight back to Atlanta, I would have to pay for it myself.

That was all I could stand. I grabbed him by the tie and pulled him to where we were standing nose to nose. "Listen, you little son-of-a-bitch," I said, my voice rising in pitch with each word. "Your airline almost killed me and all these people here. Now you refuse to do anything to help us out and you are going to argue about a hotel room and a ticket?"

I could hear the rest of my companions behind me agreeing and cheering me on. I could not believe my ears when he gave me a sarcastic answer. I pulled him all the way across the counter and let

him drop.

My gentlemanly manners and soft-spoken requests resulted in me getting a hotel room and a ticket to Atlanta for the next morning. The first thing I did when I got to my hotel room was to call Lee Fields and tell him what happened. He couldn't have been more understanding and told me not to worry about it. I was booked for what was to be a return match with Golden two weeks later. He did ask me for a favor, though. He wanted me to do a three-minute interview when I got back to Atlanta, explaining what had happened and to promote my upcoming match so he could run it on his television show. I was only too happy to do so.

The next morning in the studio, I did a three-minute interview explaining what had transpired during my aborted trip to wrestle Jimmy. I spent a majority of the three minutes telling the wrestling fans of Alabama and Tennessee what a terrible airline Southern Airways was and what sorry and incompetent people they had working for

them. There are a lot of wrestling fans in that territory, and a great number of them probably had flown on Southern Airways, which went out of business a short time later. I don't think my rant really had anything to do with them folding, but I'd like to think it did. At least the wrestling fans knew the score.

Vancouver, British Columbia was another territory that wasn't very strong, but I never hesitated to accept a booking there. It was owned by former world heavyweight champion Gene Kiniski. When he was champion, he used to call me "Handsome Jack," and every time he saw me, he would call me over, show me the world title belt, and say, "Handsome Jack. Someday, this belt will be yours. Everywhere I go, I tell the promoters, 'Take a good look at that Brisco kid. He's going to be your world champion one day.'"

I would thank him and tell him how much I appreciated his support, but I had my doubts that I

would ever get the opportunity to carry the belt. "Oh, yes, you will, Jack. You'll see. Just be patient," he would tell me.

At that point, my career had not been very conspicuous, but that didn't keep me from dreaming about winning the title someday in the future.

The first time I was booked in Vancouver as the champion, Gene greeted me with a big smile and called out, "There he is. Handsome Jack, the heavyweight champion of the world. See, I told you you'd do it."

"Thanks, Gene. You always were my biggest fan," I told him.

Wrestling Gene was a different matter altogether. He was stiff and moved in only one direction; forward. As I said earlier, he was an amazing athlete, but somewhere down the line, he got it into his head that he was a good amateur

wrestler. He would always want to shoot a bit in the ring for takedowns. I would oblige him, but I never would let him get one on me. As big and tough as he was, I prided myself in my ability to wrestle, especially on my feet. If it was just a work, I was willing to give up a takedown, but if what we were doing was for real … no way.

I admired Gene for his kindness to me, but I also respected his knowledge of the ring, and the manner in which he held the title for three years. I think I most admired him for something he did outside the ring. Shortly after he lost the world title to Dory Jr., Gene's wife committed suicide. They had two boys and Gene raised them almost entirely on his own, and they turned out to be fine young men. That certainly is not an easy task in any situation, but more so for someone in the wrestling business. He showed his opponents what kind of a man he was in the ring; he showed the rest of us the kind of man he was outside of it. Either way, he was a hard man to beat.

One of the smallest NWA territories, and one which didn't have a lot of talent when I was champion, was still one of the most enjoyable for me to visit. That was the legendary Calgary territory owned by Stu Hart. Stu ran Stampede Wrestling, the wrestling promotion that spawned his famous wrestling brood, led by former world heavyweight champion Bret "The Hitman" Hart and the late Owen Hart. Stu and his family were good to me. When I was in the area, which was a couple of times a year, I would try to spend as much time at the Hart "mansion" as possible.

The house sat on top of a mountain which overlooked the city of Calgary. I understand Stu, in return them carrying his wrestling show on TV, had given a local television station a great deal for a section of his property as a site for their facilities.

Stu had dozens of old Cadillacs sitting around in his yard. I would be surprised if many of them actually ran, but he kept them, nonetheless. Bret

spent a great deal of time with me and showed me notebooks full of drawings he had done. I'm sure most of his fans know what a great artist he is, but in 1974, he was only seventeen years old. I was amazed at his talent and was pleased when he did so well in the ring as the five-time WWF champion.

Stu was renowned for the "dungeon" in his basement. The dungeon was a makeshift mat room in which he would train wrestlers like his sons, Roddy Piper, Chris Benoit, his sons-in-law — Davey Boy Smith and Jim Neidhart — and countless others. He also liked to demonstrate submission holds to his guests and the boys he brought in to work there. That was one part of the house in which I never spent any time. I confined myself to the main floor and spent my time with the kids and listening to Stu's stories. He could weave tales of his early career and keep us all spellbound for hours.

The biggest event of the year in Calgary was the

Stampede. It was a ten-day-long celebration that included a huge rodeo, parties, and, of course, a wrestling card featuring the world champion defending the title against whomever Stu's top boy was, usually the promotion's North American champion. Held in July, it had been a tradition for years, and depending on how the dates lined up, Stu could occasionally get two shows out of it. Dory told me stories about his visits there during Stampede Week when he had the belt. It pretty much was an obligation for the champion to be there, but it was one we gladly accepted.

Stu didn't always have top talent, but I had good matches with the guys I wrestled. My first year there as champion was March 23, 1974 and I wrestled the Mongolian Stomper, who was neither Mongolian nor much of a stomper. He actually was a journeyman named Archie Gouldie, and I considered him to be a very good worker. Three months later, on June 21, I returned to wrestle Larry Lane. Two weeks later, on a card that took place during Stampede Week, I was in the ring

with Danny Little Bear. In 1975, I was there twice, wrestling two weeks in a row, the first time on July 4 against Dan Kroffat, and then Curtis Iaukea.

Stu would pick me up for the festivities around 6:30 in the morning and we would make the rounds to all the parties. We would have a drink or two at every stop. By the time I went to the ring to defend the title, my head would be spinning. We also made a stop at the Stampede Rodeo, where I would be introduced as the world champion and I would greet the crowd. Of course, that was good for business because my appearance would remind everyone at the rodeo about the upcoming matches that evening.

The parade, which was one of the highlights of the festival, would include rodeo performers, high-school bands, local dignitaries, and, of course, the heavyweight wrestling champion of the world. I would sit on top of the back seat in one of Stu's old Cadillac convertibles and wave to the

crowd. On the side of the car, Stu would have a sign that said, "Jack Brisco, world heavyweight champion." Behind us, another of Stu's Cadillacs would be towing the wresting ring filled with the twelve Hart children.

My second year at the Stampede, I was riding in Stu's convertible, as I had the year before. Stu thought he might spice things up a bit for the thousands of folks lining the streets of downtown Calgary. Sitting beside me on the back seat was a stripper, who was a Brigitte Bardot look-alike. Sometime during the ride, the stripper stood up and began to do a mock strip tease, gyrations and all. The crowd loved it, screaming and applauding to show their approval. I just tried to look the part of the champion and keep my eyes on the crowd, waving and trying to avoid looking at my parade companion. I remember thinking, "Oh, my God. What's going on here? My, God. I really have hit the big-time. If only mom could see me now."

Small towns not only meant small crowds and, usually, less-talented opponents, but smaller payoffs, as well. One might think that once I took the title, all the payoffs would be in the thousands, or at least close to six figures. Certainly, the champion would be far removed from the days of working to the point of exhaustion for $25. One would think so, anyway.

In 1975, I wrestled Ken Patera in Corpus Christi, Texas. At the time, Ken was wrestling out of Austin and was as green in the business as anyone I had ever faced. A world-class weightlifter, Ken was on the 1972 Olympic team and also won first place in the World's Strongest Man competition. He had trained with Verne Gagne in Minnesota and was learning the trade in front of small crowds. If the crowd was bad the night we met, the match was worse. It was horrible, and that's being kind. He wasn't anywhere close to being ready for a title match, and I'm sure he would agree. He was as strong as hell, but he was as stiff as he was strong.

Nights like that really tested your abilities; not only your wrestling skills, but your skills as a professional. I had to carry the match and make Ken look as believable as possible. Believability is the coin of the realm in wrestling. If a wrestler can't sell what he's doing in the ring, the fans won't return the following week (if ever), world championship match or not.

After that horrible match with Ken, I walked into Joe Blanchard's office to get my payoff. He counted it out for me; all $25 of it. He laid out two tens and one five. I could only imagine what the rest of the boys on the card made that night.

Thankfully, that didn't happen often, but it did on occasion. When I was booked into that area of Texas, or in Tennessee, Oregon, or Alabama, I would make sure I carried extra cash with me so I had enough to get out of town when it was time to move on. In fact, many of the promoters thought operating in that fashion would keep their boys in line and keep them from seeking out greener

pastures. They would pay the guys just enough to live on, but nothing more, so they couldn't move on if the opportunity were to avail itself. That only made their territories weak because the top talent wouldn't hang around long enough for the promoters to make any real money. They agreed to come in for one shot, or for a short time, but they never stayed long. With a lack of talent and weak programs, those territories died a slow death.

Chapter 27
The Ballpoint Pen

A good example of a territory that died due to the questionable business practices of the owner was Detroit. The Detroit territory was owned by Ed Farhat and Francis Flesher. Farhat wrestled as the Sheik, and when I say wrestled, I am being as generous as I can be. I use the term "wrestling" in the loosest of manners. Farhat wasn't very big; about five-foot-ten and 250 pounds. He was what was known as a "gimmick wrestler;" a guy who gets over by using a prop or portraying an over-the-top, outlandish character. In most cases, those guys had little, if any, wrestling skills. As the owner and booker of the territory, though, the Sheik kept himself in the forefront and kept the area's top title, the United States heavyweight championship, around his own waist for decades. I didn't know him very well, but I had heard enough tales about how he ran his territory to

have an immediate dislike for him. He was one of those promoters you hoped you would never have to work for, and if you did, you prayed it wouldn't be for long.

He drew good houses for many years by using only a few top guys. He would bring me in to defend the title, or bring in Dory, Terry, Johnny Valentine, and some of the other top boys as challengers for his belt. He would pay them decent wages, but when it came to his regular crew, he paid them subsistence wages and pocketed the rest.

I once saw him in Las Vegas when I was there for an NWA convention. He was there as a promoter and I had been asked to be there because I was next in line to win the world title. He was sitting at a craps table, acting like a high roller, and lost $30,000 in less than fifteen minutes. Not only did he lose the 30 grand, but he laughed about it. That action made me dislike him all the more. I seethed every time I saw him after that. He was starving

the boys who were wrestling for him and he had no respect for his own money.

He was 50 years old when I "wrestled" him for the first time. His gimmick was that he was an Arab from a wealthy family in the Middle East and came to the United States to defeat all American wrestlers. In real life, Ed was Lebanese and was born in Michigan shortly after his parents emigrated from Syria. He served his country in World War II and returned home to work as a day laborer while training to become a professional wrestler with Detroit promoter Bert Ruby. He began wrestling in 1952 and did well as one of the first heels to appear on television.

Part of his gimmick was his "ability to throw fire" in the face of his opponents when he was in trouble in the ring, or out of it. His mystical fire-throwing skill was really only magician's flash paper that he would light and use to "blind" his opponents. Other props he used were pencils or ballpoint pens, which he used to jab into his

opponent's throat, leg, arm, or other available body part.

I wrestled him for the first time on September 8, 1974 in Toronto with my title against his U.S. title. All he did was jab me about 30 times with his ballpoint pen. The match lasted ... well, as long as it took to jab me 30 times with his ballpoint pen. I didn't have to do very much. In fact, all I really had to do was sell what the Sheik was doing. I would stagger around the ring, acting like I was in pain, and hang on until we got close to the time the match was supposed to end. At that point, I lost my temper and attacked him fists and feet. When we refused to listen to the referee, we were both disqualified. The match went just four minutes and six seconds. I went to the dressing room, with title intact, showered, and left.

I hated matches like that, but to my surprise, they usually drew well. I wanted to put on a good show and to wrestle, but with gimmick guys, that was asking the impossible. In some cases, I would try

to get them to wrestle, even if it was just a little, so I could feel good about having earned my pay. Unfortunately, most gimmick wrestlers were just that … gimmick guys.

Six months later, on March 25, 1975, we met in Cincinnati to a sold-out house. That time, I didn't have time to take off my ring jacket before he attacked me. He jabbed me another 30 times with his pen, threw fire, and was disqualified. What fun.

After that match, I was on the receiving end of one of his famous payoff scams. After the match, he handed me my payoff. A lot of promoters paid at the end of the night. I only allowed the few I trusted to mail a check to me later. I took his check, which was for $500, and put it into my wallet. I carried it around with me for about two weeks while I was on the road. When I got back home, I went to the bank to cash it and handed it to the teller, along with a few others. The teller looked at me and said, "I'm sorry, Mr.

Brisco. There seems to be a problem with one of your checks."

She didn't have to tell me which one. I knew it had to be the check from Farhat. The problem was, he hadn't signed it. I should have inspected it more closely than I had, but I didn't want to be in Farhat's presence any longer than necessary. I simply took it and left the arena.

I thought about calling him and complaining, and asking for another check, but I didn't think he'd send me one. You know, the old "the check is in the mail" scenario. So, I put the check back in my wallet, thinking I'd see him down the road in the near future. Sure enough, we were both booked in Atlanta two months later on May 23rd. "Farhat," I called out to him in the dressing room. "There's something wrong with the last check you wrote me."

"There can't be anything wrong with it, Jack. I swear the check is good," Farhat said.

Here was the feared Sheik, cowering in a corner of the dressing room, trying to convince me his check was good. I asked him, "How would I know if it was good or not? You never signed the damn thing."

He promised me he would mail another one right away, signed this time. "No need to trouble yourself, Ed. I have the check right here in my wallet. You can just sign it," I told him.

He finally used that ballpoint pen for something useful; signing his name on the check to pay me for our last match. And that's exactly what it was; our last match.

Ed drew great crowds for many years, but the gimmick wore thin and his shady business practices (falsely advertising top-name wrestlers on his shows) eventually killed his territory. It closed in 1980. He had his last "match" in Japan in 1995 … when he was 71 years old. The Detroit promotion closed in 1980 and Ed passed away on

January 18, 2003.

When asked to recall my matches, I never include the matches I had with the gimmick guys. I try my best to forget them, or at least block them out of my memory

Dick Afflis was another guy who was difficult to wrestle. Gaining notoriety as "Dick the Bruiser," he was a star on the gridiron at the University of Nevada and played for a short time with the Green Bay Packers. He left football for a more lucrative career in the ring, but not before he received his trademarked gravel voice from a crushed esophagus.

His gimmick was a barroom brawler who trained by drinking beer and smoking cigars as he tore through opponents with his customary punch-and-kick style of "wrestling." He spent most of his early career wrestling for Farhat in Detroit and for Gagne in Minneapolis, where he teamed with his "cousin," Reggie Lisowski, better known as the

"Crusher," with whom he held the local tag team title on and off for years. He also owned and booked the Indianapolis territory.

From 1970 through 1974, we teamed together six times in St. Louis, usually in six-man affairs. The first time we actually wrestled each other in St. Louis was on January 3, 1975. 11,314 fans packed the building that night and more than 3,000 fans were turned away at the door. It was a classic Dick the Bruiser gimmick match. He came out kicking and punching at the bell. (At least, I think the bell rang) I could wrestle a little with Dick than I could with the Sheik, which made the match a bit more interesting, but every time I hit a takedown or locked in a hold, he would punch or stomp his way out of it. I would sell the massacre and the referee would play his part of trying to protect the fallen champion (me).

Frustrated, Dick would attack the referee and get disqualified. He would turn towards the fans, flex his muscles, and we would go home. I have to

give it to Dick, though. He kept himself in tremendous shape. Even after he left wrestling, he continued his workout routine. He passed away at age 62 on November 10, 1991 after a morning workout with his beloved weights. He was a great heel in the ring and a wonderful father and grandfather out of it. He was sorely missed by his legion of fans.

Others were just as bad, if not worse. The first time I wrestled Maurice "Mad Dog" Vachon was on January 10, 1973 in Miami. I would have been happy if I had never had to wrestle him again, but we met in the ring at least four other times — in Atlanta [January 12, 1973], in Portland [March 19, 1974], and twice in Houston [July 25, 1974 and June 13, 1975]. He, too, was near the end of his career and he had a feared reputation in the ring. Vachon had an amateur background and represented his home country of Canada in the 1948 Olympics. I understand he began his career as plain Maurice Vachon, relying on his skills on the mat as a babyface. He didn't get over until he

shaved his head, grew a goatee, growled his words on interviews, and threw any semblance of wrestling out the window.

A multi-time world champion for Gagne in the AWA, "Mad Dog" stood five-foot-seven and weighed 225 pounds. He was a tough guy, there was no doubt about that, but what wrestling skills he once knew were either forgotten or purposely left behind. He relied on kicking, stomping, selling, and getting disqualified. I have to give him some credit because the fans loved it and I am truly glad they did, but I was getting awfully tired of wrestling against people with his style. I never could get used to the fact that, on some nights, I was supposed to be defending the heavyweight wrestling championship of the world, and I wasn't given a single opportunity to display that little thing called "wrestling."

There were several others who fit that category. Abdullah the Butcher, a 300-pound madman, could move like a cat in the ring. Like

the Sheik, his prop was a pencil or a pen. I wrestled him at least ten times and you can probably guess how our matches turned out.

Frank Goodish, better known as "Bruiser Brody," was another gimmick guy who had an almost cult-like following. He stood about six-foot-eight and weighed more than 300 pounds. I didn't get to know him at all, but everyone tells me he was a good and kind man. In the ring, he played the part of a wild man from Santa Fe, New Mexico. He looked the part, as well, with long scraggly hair and beard, and big furry boots. When we wrestled, we didn't spend much of our time in the ring. He loved to work outside of it on the arena floor, and his favorite move was to use my head as a battering ram, running it into ring posts, tables, the ring steps, or whatever else may have been around. He would grab me by the hair and sling me around.

I would sell everything he did and, on the rare occasion we were in the ring, I would take him

down and hook an arm or leg. I never held it long, but would allow him to punch his way out, hollering like the madman the fans thought he was. I would brawl back and the fans would go wild. Seeing the madman get a dose of the medicine he had been handing out to their local heroes week after week would bring them to the edge of their seats. Our matches would usually end in a disqualification — occasionally, a double disqualification — or I would eke out a win by catching him in a cradle or roll-up.

Frank died a bizarre and tragic death in 1988 while wrestling for Carlos Colón in Puerto Rico. He was stabbed to death in the shower after a match by fellow wrestler José González. Strangely enough, Gonzalez went to trial, but he was not convicted. There were a number of the boys in the dressing room who were there and knew what happened, but they refused to testify. That always baffled me. Kayfabe or not, a good man had been murdered in cold blood, with others present, and nobody stood up.

Not all the gimmick wrestlers were heels. There was one who was as popular as anyone who ever laced up a pair of wrestling boots; Houston Harris, better known as Bobo Brazil.

Born on July 10, 1924 in rural Arkansas, Bobo was just seven years old when his father passed away. His family headed north and eventually settled in Benton Harbor, Michigan. He eked out a living by driving a produce truck, picking fruit, and working in the steel mills.

Former world heavyweight champion Joe Savoldi spotted Bobo working out one day and took him under his wing. Always the businessman, Joe saw a future star in Bobo and traded his tutelage for Bobo's brawn in setting up the ring and other tasks as Joe took his promotion on the road. His first known match took place on March 29, 1948 in Benton Harbor when he wrestled to a draw with Armand Myers.

I remember him telling me that in the early days,

he didn't want to travel far from home, which always made me smile knowing what an amazing international star he became. It was the popularity of television that helped get him over and he did as much to shatter the color barrier in the '50s as anyone. As a babyface, he could wrestle villains of all colors and ethnicities and make people of every race proud. He had great runs with Buddy Rogers, Dick the Bruiser, the Sheik, Buddy Austin, and countless others. In fact, Bobo became the first Afro-American world heavyweight wrestling champion by defeating Buddy Austin for the World Wrestling Association title in Los Angeles. An interesting part of world title lore is that Bobo never lost the WWA belt. While he was still champion, Mike LeBell (the southern California promoter and brother of the great "Judo" Gene LeBell) rejoined the NWA, which, of course, had their own champion, Gene Kiniski.

Bobo and Gene had an amazing program for dozens of matches, most of which went the hour time limit or longer in the Olympic Auditorium in

LA. Those matches were billed of such importance that, for their match on December 18, 1968, there were training camps set up and extensive media coverage. The match ended in a draw when the time limit expired before the referee could slap the mat for the third time when Bobo was pinning Gene after administering his famous "coco-butt." Gene had to be assisted from the ring and later gave Bobo his due, saying it wasn't Dory who defeated him a little more than a month later in Tampa, but it was Bobo since he [Gene] was still recovering from the aftermath of their match.

Bobo really couldn't wrestle and was not much of a worker, either, but he looked like a million dollars in the ring. As I said, he broke into the business in the late 1940s and helped end the color barrier, but he guarded his position with a vengeance and, according to many of the other black wrestlers of the day, did very little, if anything, to help them. He was the first black star who was known worldwide and he apparently

wanted to make sure he kept his spot on top.

His gimmick was the dreaded "coco-butt," which was a head-butt that sent his opponents reeling around the ring. That usually would spell the end for Bobo's opponents as they would drop to the mat and be covered for the three-count. He was tough in the ring and you would never want to meet a nicer guy, regardless of the politics of the sport.

The first time we met for the title was in St. Louis on March 15, 1974. Bobo was three months shy of his fiftieth birthday and he was beginning to slow down. We had one of the greatest endings to our match, which put Bobo over all the more with the huge following he had amassed throughout his years in the ring. I took the first fall with the "O'Connor roll-up," shocking Bobo and the crowd as he had been in control for most of the first fall. Bobo took the second fall with an abdominal stretch and made me submit with only five minutes remaining in the 60-minute time limit.

When the third fall got under way, he caught me once again in an abdominal stretch. As the seconds ticked by, Bobo realized he wasn't going to make me submit, so he dropped to the mat and shifted the stretch into my old finisher, the guillotine. I escaped and shot in on Bobo. We were both exhausted.

Throughout the fall, the announcer kept announcing the time; "Three minutes remaining ... two minutes remaining ... one minute remaining." Bobo wrapped his huge hands around my head, pulled me to my feet, and set me up for what the fans in Kiel had come to see … the coco-butt. I had been blocking it all night, building up to the moment when he could use the coco-butt for victory. Bobo planted his forehead on mine and I sold it. I went out like a light and fell to the mat. Bobo draped his body over me and the referee counted, "One … two …," and then the bell rang. The match was over. Bobo fell one second short of winning the title.

The match was declared a draw. Bobo and I weren't the only people in the auditorium who were exhausted. You could see the exhaustion in the eyes of the fans, as well. We put them through all the emotions of the match — the same emotions we were feeling — which was what we were being paid to do. In the eyes of his fans, Bobo left the ring as the uncrowned champion. I didn't "regain consciousness" until he was gone and, with the help of the officials, rose slowly to my feet, grabbed the belt, and woozily made my way back to the dressing room.

One thing Bobo loved was his Red Man chewing tobacco. In 1975, a few days before I left for a tour of Japan, I received a phone call from Dory Jr. He asked me if I would mind doing a favor for Bobo. Brazil was in Japan and was just about out of Red Man chewing tobacco. I had never chewed tobacco, but I smoked cigarettes at the time and knew the Japanese variety of tobacco was one of the worst in the world. Since Bobo couldn't get any Red Man in Japan, Junior asked me to take a

dozen pouches for Bobo. I told him I would be happy to do that and packed it in with my gear.

When I walked into the dressing room, Bobo was the first one to greet me. "Did you bring it?" he asked.

"Bring what, Bobo?"

"My Red Man. C'mon, Jack. Dory said he called you. Don't tell me you forgot."

"Nah, I was just ribbing you. I brought it. It's here in my bag."

"Oh. Thank God, Jack. Thank you. Oh, thank you."

I pulled out one pouch and tossed it to him. His eyes grew big and he had a puzzled look on his face. "What's this?" he asked.

"What's what?"

"Is this all? This isn't enough. This won't last me more than a few days."

"I'm sorry, Bobo. I thought that would be enough to last you until you got back to the States. Hell, I don't chew tobacco. How was I supposed to know how much to bring? All Dory said was to bring you some Red Man. He never told me how much."

He looked so disappointed standing there with that one bag in his hand. I hadn't planned to let him in on the joke until after my match, but he was such a nice guy, I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't play out the rib as long as I would have liked. "Here Bobo," I said, reaching into my bag. "Here's the rest of it."

A huge smile broke across his face when I handed the rest of his tobacco treasure to him. He started laughing and ran over, hugging and kissing me on the cheek. "Let me go, Bobo. You're going to kill me. I have to wrestle Baba tonight." I had been in plenty of Bobo's bearhugs in the ring, but none as

tight as that one.

Bobo, too, is gone now. He passed away at the age of 74 on January 20, 1998. The fans loved him, especially the kids. There is one sure thing about Bobo. The love he had for the sport, the fans, and the kids, was no gimmick.

Chapter 28
Climbing the Ropes

I don't know if there were more gimmick wrestlers than actual wrestlers in the business during that time, but I know I faced more than my share of them. However, I wasn't the only person in the ring with a strong amateur background, but we were few and far between. I've named so many of them already: Lou Thesz, Danny Hodge, Pat O'Connor, Abe Jacobs, Tim Woods, Rene Goulet, Jim Raschke, and Bob Backlund. I always looked forward to my matches with the guys who could actually wrestle. We gave the fans more than their money's worth and we had fun when we would shoot takedowns or try each other out.

Wrestling those guys was like having a night off, but don't take that as an insult. When a professional wrestler says wrestling you is a night off, they are paying you the highest of

compliments. It means you are easy to work with in the ring. Even working a 60-minute broadway could be a night off if it was done with the right opponent. Of course, saying that about an amateur wrestler would be an insult. That would be like saying, "You really aren't any good and wrestling you is like having a night off."

I always enjoyed wrestling against an opponent who had an amateur background. Two of the best amateurs I faced during my early days in the business were Bob Roop and Dale Lewis. They were as different as night and day in their styles of wrestling, but they both did as well in the ring as they did on the mat.

Bob came to the national and world wrestling scene late in comparison to a lot of other amateurs. Although he began wrestling in the eighth grade while growing up in East Lansing, Michigan, and continued to do well throughout his high-school years, he left the mat and joined the Michigan State Spartans football team.

His Saturday afternoon heroics on the field didn't last long. After a year and a half, Bob joined the Army and left East Lansing. He served his country for three years before returning to the halls of academia, this time with the "Fighting Salukis" at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. He gave up football for wrestling and took up where he had left off five years prior. Even though he did not place at the nationals, he did well on the mat and gained a berth on the 1964 Greco-Roman Olympic wrestling team as an alternate.

Four years later, he made the U.S. Olympic team in the heavyweight division. At six-foot-one and weighing around 300 pounds, he was a very capable wrestler, but he didn't have the necessary experience to compete with the highly skilled Greco-Roman wrestlers from around the world. The competition in Mexico City was brutal, but to even compete in the world in anything is a great achievement, especially in wrestling. The spring before he turned pro, he won the AAU National Greco championship and

then headed to Florida to work for Eddie Graham.

A good amateur background does not guarantee you will do well in the professional ring. On the other hand, some of the best matches I had were with tremendous athletes who had never set foot on a mat in their life. Bob was one who made the transition successfully, but it took him some time.

When Bob came to Florida, he weighed about 310 pounds and was somewhat awkward in learning his new trade. However, being the athlete he was, it didn't take him long to catch on. One night when we were teamed up, I had one of our opponents in a front facelock. I maneuvered him over to our corner to give Bob the tag so he could finish them off. I whispered to him, "Okay, Bob. Climb up on the top rope." The match was supposed to end with Bob climbing up onto the top rope and dropping down on the opponent. After the tag, I turned around, still holding our opponent, and waited … and waited … but there was no Bob Roop.

When I looked around, I saw him; not in the corner, but halfway down the apron, almost to the center of the ring, trying to climb up on the top rope. He kept slipping and falling into the ring. Each time, he would get up and try it again, only to fall back into the ring, landing hard on his back each time. It was all we could do to keep from laughing out loud. I worked my way over to him and said, "Bob, Bob. Use the turnbuckles," motioning with my head over to the corner.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks, Jack." He climbed up onto the top turnbuckle and did the spot. Like I said, he caught on pretty quickly.

We wrestled for the title a few times and drew well in Florida. He had a devastating finisher called the shoulder-breaker. He would hoist you up with your stomach on his shoulder, drop to one knee, and jam your shoulder over his knee. It was a great finisher as far as the fans were concerned. Bob could make it look like the most dire situation an opponent could ever find himself,

and he would do it with the utmost finesse, as well as protecting you all the way down. He was a true professional on both sides of the ropes.

Bob was a tremendous draw for us in Florida and we kept the Florida tag team straps on him and his partner, Bob Orton, Jr., for a long time. Fans who never had the opportunity to see him work missed a thrill and a real treat.

Bob and I had a great deal in common with our amateur backgrounds, but we hardly ever spoke of them. From time to time, if the name of someone we had wrestled came up during conversation, or a team we had wrestled against came to mind, we might talk about the old days on the mat, but only briefly. Otherwise, we talked about what we were doing at the time. The college mat was a different world and was in the past. We both had new worlds to conquer.

Dale Lewis was different. He never wrestled in high school, but he was an outstanding athlete in

both football and basketball. He went to Marquette University for a year before leaving to join the Marine Corps, where he wrestled and, with only six months or so of wrestling experience, won an alternate spot on the 1956 Olympic wrestling team.

After leaving the Marines, Dale wrestled for the University of Oklahoma. He won the NCAA heavyweight championship in both 1960 and 1961. He was a two-time all-American and made the Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling team in 1960. He gained his berth on the team by defeating Bob Marella, who later would gain fame as the WWF's "Gorilla Monsoon." In 1959, Marella was the NCAA runner-up in the heavyweight division for Ithaca College of New York.

Although he was a two-time national champion, Dale did not have much of a reputation as an amateur. His style on the mat was totally defensive, much like that of Larry Lane, who just closed up and refused to wrestle me in the semi-

finals of the 1965 NCAA championships. Dale was big and slow and would confine his actions to the edge of the mat, waiting until his opponent would get tired, get frustrated, or make a desperate mistake. Inevitably, one of those scenarios was exactly what would happen … and one mistake was all Dale would need to nail them.

Dale was at his best in the bottom position. He could escape from anyone and he could ride fairly well, so what he would do in most of his matches was take the bottom position, escape for one point, and try to take the guy down. If not, he would take the top position in the next period and ride his opponent, gaining a point that way. As a result, most of his matches would end with a score of two to one. The rest of the time, he would just try to avoid being taken down or stepping off the mat.

As slow as he was on the mat, he was just as slow in the ring. He already was a professional when he came to Florida. Remember, Eddie liked the boys with an amateur background and two

national titles made Dale all the more appealing to him. And appealing he was. He made the perfect heel when he became "Professor" Dale Lewis. He had a good run in Florida and made big money in the Bahamas and Puerto Rico.

We developed a version of the chicken wing, where he would lock it in and drape you over his back, as his finisher. We called it the "Lewis lock" and he carved a path of carnage and destruction throughout the state, leaving each opponent conceding and/or injured. We played him up as hell on wheels and his "Lewis lock" as being unassailable.

Eddie came up with a fantastic idea to set up Dale's title shot with me for the Florida title. At a television taping in 1970, Gordon Solie began talking about the possibilities for a match between the two of us on television in a non-title match. At the time, Dale was offering $1,000 to anyone who could beat him in 20 minutes or less. As the TV program unfolded, Gordon said, "Jack Brisco

should be here at any moment. I have never known Jack to miss a match." At the next break, Gordon came on the air and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have just received word that, due to difficulties in making plane connections, Jack Brisco will not be here to honor his commitment to wrestle Dale Lewis tonight."

That gave Dale the perfect opportunity to come out onto the set and run me down, saying he didn't believe my "excuse," and accusing me of being afraid to meet him in the ring. He also made remarks about graduates from Oklahoma State. Gerry came out to defend me, saying I never had run from an opponent in my life, and I certainly wouldn't run from someone like Dale Lewis. One thing led to another with Gerry challenging Dale to wrestle him right there on television. Gerry got into the ring, Dale followed, and the battle ensued.

After the two engaged in what was more of a slug-fest than a wrestling match, Dale trapped Gerry in the "Lewis lock." Gerry refused to submit

and Gordon sold it beautifully. He kept saying, "Nobody has ever withstood the Lewis lock for so long. What an unbelievable display of courage the Florida champion's younger brother is showing."

Gerry was in the hold for several minutes and seemed to be on the verge of passing out. When Dale was unable to make him concede, he stood up and began kicking him as he lay helpless on the mat. I came running into the studio, dressed in my street clothes and with my gear in hand. I dropped my bags to the floor and rolled into the ring, fully dressed, to save my brother and to defend the Brisco name. Dale dropped Gerry and went after me. We slugged it out and he headed for the dressing room.

Dale ran over to Gordon's desk and said, "I said I'd take care of the younger Brisco punk first … and I did. Now I'm ready for the other Brisco punk."

When Gordon asked him why he thought it was

necessary to continue his onslaught after it was obvious he had Gerry beaten, Dale said, "Did baby Brisco get hurt? Too bad. Wrestling is a man's sport, and I question that even his big brother qualifies. If the Brisco boys were smart, they'd go back to their Chickasaw Indian reservation and weave blankets for the tourists!"

We pushed the idea of Gerry having suffered torn ligaments and a pinched nerve in his left shoulder. Two weeks later, Dale and I wrestled in Tampa in a $1,000 Challenge Match. It is no exaggeration when I say Dale and I wrestled hundreds of times over the next two years. In wrestling jargon, we were "married" to each other during that time.

Dale died of leukemia on August 31, 1997 in the hospital at the University of Oklahoma. It was another great loss for the world of wrestling.

Dale made it big in Puerto Rico, as did many other American wrestlers. The promotion there

was owned by Carlos Colón. Carlos was as much a national sports hero as the country has ever seen. His Universal Wrestling Council promoted all around the Caribbean and he was one of the most intelligent men in the wrestling business. Rarely venturing outside his native country to wrestle, he knew where his fortune laid, and that was in the rings and the towns he had built.

The major title in his promotion was the Universal heavyweight title, which he held an unprecedented sixteen times. In some articles, Carlos is credited with being the NWA world heavyweight champion for a two-week period, but that isn't true. He did defeat Ric Flair, the champion at the time, on January 6, 1983, but the title wasn't on the line, and supposedly, he dropped the title back to Flair on January 23. Video of the match shows the referee handing Carlos his WWC title belt after the January 6 win, but he is never handed the NWA belt. More than likely, the title "switch" was used to give Carlos

credibility with the Puerto Rican fans.

I loved wrestling for Carlos. What was not to love? He paid well, we drew great crowds, and the sun and the beaches were hard to beat. I went over well in the Caribbean. They seemed to like my style and the fans always cheered for the American babyfaces. That was never more evident to me than the night I wrestled Pedro Morales there.

Pedro, a former WWWF heavyweight champion, had won the title from Ivan Koloff in Madison Square Garden three weeks after Ivan upset Bruno Sammartino in the same ring. Pedro was a wonderful, gregarious person. Always laughing and kind to everyone, he was a true gentleman. He would greet people as if he had known them all of his life, and he usually would be the one to buy drinks. You couldn't help but love the guy.

Pedro was from San Juan and began wrestling in the United States on the West Coast in the early

1960s. He became a top draw in no time. He had an appeal that not only reached the Latino fans, but everyone, regardless of nationality or ethnic background. His first world title was not the WWF title. It was the old Los Angeles-based World Wrestling Association title that had been held by Edouard Carpentier, Fred Blassie, and Dick Beyer (who was wrestling as the "Sensational, Intelligent, Destroyer"), who Pedro defeated for the belt. He won the laurels on March 12, 1965, a few months before I entered the ring for the first time. I wasn't even wet behind the ears when he won his first world championship. It couldn't have happened to anyone better.

The funny thing about Pedro and I wrestling each other was that, even though he was one of their own, the fans cheered for me. It was hard to believe — a white guy from Oklahoma getting over better than the Latin babyface. If you stop and think about it, it isn't all that strange, I suppose. More times than not, people will root for the underdog. In respect to title matches, fan

support will usually go to the good-guy challenger when he faces a good-guy champion. That night, Pedro and I wrestled to an hour draw.

Pedro has left the battles inside the ring, but is still involved with wrestling. He has been with World Wrestling Entertainment as an announcer for its Spanish broadcasts and is bringing wrestling to a new generation of fans. I hope they realize how fortunate they are.

Chapter 29
Skinning the Cat

I really don't have any idea how many matches I had as champion during those two and a half years, but it must have been close to a thousand. I would get my bookings from the NWA president's office. At first, they came from Sam Muchnick, which I would receive once a month in the mail, and later, from Jim Barnett's office in Atlanta. The Atlanta booking office was a bit easier. Since I lived right outside the city, I would just drive to the office and pick up my booking sheet. Those sheets would tell me what town I was to be in and on what date.

Originally, I was told I would be wrestling for three weeks and then have one week off. From the beginning of my run, I never saw that week off. A promoter would call Sam or Jim and call in a favor, or say they had a big card scheduled and

needed the champion, and they would book me wherever it was they promised I would be.

Once I had my bookings, the travel arrangements were left up to me. I would book my own flights and set up a rental car. If I was going to be in a territory for a week, or even a couple of days, I might ride with some of the boys, but most of the time, I would drive myself. That was only due to practicality, not because I wanted to set myself apart from everyone else.

As champion, I usually would be in the main event, which traditionally meant my match was last on the card. If I rode with someone, that meant they would have to hang around and wait for me to finish. Of course, being last on the program meant I could get to the arena a little later than I normally would have, so I didn't have to leave quite as early as everyone else. I didn't have to be there at seven o'clock for the eight o'clock curtain jerker if I wasn't going to be on until nine or 9:30. The last thing I wanted to do was sit around in a dressing

room for three hours. The travel did get a little lonely from time to time, but I got used to it fairly quickly.

Working out was another challenge the wrestlers had to face when we were on the road. Traveling from town to town every day and arriving, in many cases, with only enough time to get ready to wrestle, left us little (if any) time to work out. That wasn't as big a problem for me. Doing hour broadways in the ring every night, at the pace I set, was enough to keep me in top shape. I had never lifted weights like so many of the boys did, so when I arrived in a town, I didn't have to find a gym. My training had always consisted of isometric exercise and running. I would do the isometrics for about an hour and run four to five miles. I could do that just about anywhere I went. Even back in high school and college, my coaches wouldn't let us lift weights. In fact, if Coach Roderick caught us lifting weights at Oklahoma State University, he would make us do extra duty by running the steps in the football

stadium or running laps. They thought it would make us muscle-bound and restrict our movement on the mat. They taught us that flexibility and technique would usually triumph over a more-muscular opponent. That isn't to say we weren't strong, but it was a different kind of strength. We could outmatch our opponents through strength and endurance.

Coach Roderick's philosophy worked well. He put out champion after champion for years. Of course, now they know lifting weights correctly does not make you muscle-bound, and there is a lot more knowledge available about nutrition and training. There always will be arguments, I suppose, that one way is better than the other. Times change and so do methods of training. What I was taught was the best for the time and was used by many of the great champions of the day.

Most of the time, when I was the NWA champion, I kept my weight between 225 and 232

pounds. That was light for a heavyweight, but I was in much better shape than most of the guys I wrestled.

One of the other workout methods I used while on the road was to get in the ring with people like Pat O'Connor (one of my favorite workout partners) and roll around the ring. Pat and I would wrestle each other hard for 20-minute spurts. He was tough and he pushed me hard. By the time I was champion, it had been more than ten years since he had lost the title to Buddy Rogers, but he hadn't lost a step.

Pat had a reputation of being tough in the ring. He would wear out his opponents by wearing them down during a match, which is what we called "blowing them up." He would do that by putting all his weight on his opponent, rather than riding him loosely. When he did that, his opponent expended his energy pushing against Pat's weight. Pat would lean on you with all his 250 pounds and just lay there, making you work harder

and, in the process, wearing you out. During one of the times I wrestled him in St. Louis, he kept throwing a headlock, taking me to the mat, and lying on my chest. As a rule, when you work a match, you always try to be as "light" as possible, and not lean on your opponent. Not Pat. He thought it was great sport to do it. When he felt he had you sufficiently worn down, he would pick up the pace of the match and try to run you. Even when you had him in a standing position, like a standing headlock, he would lean into you, or pull down on your arm to tire you out. He would pull you in one direction and pull you in another. Most of the time, when your opponent had you in a headlock, you wouldn't even know they were there. Pat would work with a heavy hand, and then, after the match, he would go back to the dressing room and tell everyone, "Yeah, the kid blew up on me."

Pat was a great wrestler. He was very proud of his skills and his famous "O'Connor roll-up" finishing move. I've mentioned the move several

times before and thought I might explain it. Pat would arm-whip his opponent into the ropes and, when he rebounded off, would go behind him, wrap his arms around his waist, and follow him into the ropes on the opposite side of the ring. He would then sit back and roll his opponent over, flip over on top, and pin him. It is one of the classic moves in the sport and Pat was the one who came up with the idea.

One day, I couldn't resist pulling a rib on him with the help of my friend, Brian Blair. Brian had been wrestling in Florida and was leaving to work for Pat in St. Louis. I taught Brian the move and told him when he met with Pat in Missouri and he asked what finishing maneuver he used, to tell him he used the "Brisco roll-up."

Brian did just that when he met with Pat and, of course, Pat took the bait and asked what the "Brisco roll-up" was. Brian got in the ring with Pat and demonstrated the move — Pat's own move. Pat was furious. "Who told you that was

the Brisco roll-up?" he yelled. "That's the O'Connor roll-up!"

It was all in fun, but I couldn't resist. It did make up for him trying to blow me up in the ring, but it was a good start.

I developed two moves during my training sessions with Pat. I thought of the first when Pat tossed me over the top rope. As I went over, I grabbed the top rope with both hands and flipped over the rope, still holding it with my back facing the inside of the ring. I would then pull myself up and do a backward flip over the top rope back into the ring. I think they call it "skinning the cat" now. Until Ricky Steamboat came along, I was the only one using that move. He was in high school in St. Petersburg and saw me do it at the matches. Years later, it became one of his signature moves.

One of the other moves I created happened when I was shooting in on Pat and he dumped me over the

top rope. As before, I tried to grab the rope so I could backflip myself back into the ring. However, I lost my grip and landed on the ring apron. Pat rushed me and, by instinct alone, I drove my shoulder into his midsection. As he doubled over, I vaulted over the top rope and took him to the mat with a "sunset flip" and pinned him. That move became a standard in the ring.

Something else I had to contend with as champion was injuries. Fortunately, the injuries I had to face weren't serious ... mostly bruises and sprains, but you learn to work with minor injuries when the need arose. The old adage, "the show must go on," held as true in wrestling as in any other entertainment medium. In other sports, like football, baseball, or team sports, if you get hurt or injured, you can sit out a game and have a backup sent in for you. This isn't the case in professional wrestling. The promoters didn't have someone sitting on the sidelines, waiting to substitute for you. There were, however, plenty of guys who were waiting to take your spot …

permanently. The pressure to perform was all the more important when you were defending the world title.

A lot of people — the fans, the promoters, and even the boys on the undercard — depended on the champion to show up and put on a good show. The fans deserved no less than the best from everyone in the ring. It was their money that paid us and their loyalty that brought them back and allowed us to make a living doing what we loved. The livelihood of promoters and the boys depended on them buying tickets, and so did mine.

There were several factors that kept me from being injured too often. I was in good condition, I didn't try to do crazy moves in the ring, and I was wrestling some of the top pros. Usually, it was the guys who didn't what they were doing that got you injured, not the top guys. When you were in the ring, it was up to you to protect both yourself and your opponent. The top stars knew how to do that, but at the same time, make the people believe they

were killing you.

I wrestled more than a few guys who were lucky to find their way to the ring. Most of the time, I knew about their lack of skills, and in those case, I wrestled them in a more cautious manner. Those matches, unfortunately, were not as interesting or as exciting for the fans, and they certainly weren't as much fun for me.

There were times, however, when we got hurt by experienced, seasoned pros. As in any sport, accidents happen, no matter how careful you are. The two "busted" eyes I received during my career were courtesy of Ronnie Garvin, and I was at risk every time I was in the ring with Johnny Valentine or Harley Race. Shortly before I left wrestling, when my brother Gerry and I were teaming up, we wrestled the Road Warriors, Animal and Hawk. I don't think there is a wrestling fan anywhere who doesn't know about the famous (or infamous) Road Warriors, or doesn't remember them rushing to the ring with

heavy metal music blaring in the background. They were billed from the bad streets of Chicago, but they trained in Minnesota with Verne Gagne. Joe Laurinaitis (Animal) and Michael Hegstrand (Hawk) made a formidable team. They took their name from the sequel to Mel Gibson's Mad Max film, The Road Warrior. They looked and acted every bit the part of the post-apocalyptic denizens seen in the picture; the remnants of humanity left behind after the attempted annihilation of the human race. Hawk and Animal in the flesh and in the ring were as tough as nails. When we got back to the dressing room after our match with them, I had bruises all over my body. My left side was a mass of black-and-blue marks … a souvenir from Animal and Hawk.

The worst injury I received in the ring during my time as champion happened in Houston on October 18, 1974, when I was wrestling Jose Lothario [Guadalupe Robledo]. Jose began his ring career as a boxer in his home country of Mexico. Being one of ten children, boxing seemed like a way to a

better life for Jose and his family. Competing as a middleweight, Jose found himself in the audience at a lucha libre show. In an altercation with one of the wrestlers at ringside, Jose nailed him with a punch and knocked him out. The local promoter, who had been watching from the wings, convinced Jose to trade in his gloves for a pair of wrestling trunks.

I would have to list Jose as one of my favorite opponents. He was a fantastic worker and had a huge following in Florida, Texas, Puerto Rico, and everywhere he was booked. I first met and worked with him in Florida in 1968. Every time I saw him wrestle one of the champions — Kiniski, Dory, Harley —he always looked like he was on the verge of taking the title away from them. Later, after I won the title, we wrestled often and consistently drew big houses.

In many ways, Houston was as much Lothario's town as it was Paul Boesch's. To liven things up there one Friday night, I defended my title against

Jose in Houston with brass knucks rules. I don't know if any champion had done that before, but the rules were different than those found in a standard wrestling match. Our hands were taped up like those of boxers and punches were allowed. You could win the match by pinfall, submission, or knockout. The angle we shot was a good one. Jose was the reigning brass knuckles champion of Texas and the odds were in his favor. I was going into the lion's den and pulling up a chair. It was Jose's town and Jose's type of match. Even with the stipulation in his favor, we went to a 60-minute draw.

The injury happened when Jose threw me over the top rope and I landed on the floor, coming down with all my weight on my heel. My leg immediately went numb. I crawled back into the ring, tied up with Jose, and whispered, "I can't feel anything below my knee and I can't stand up." To give me the time I needed to try to regain the feeling in my leg, he pulled me into a front facelock and took me to the mat. He must have

held me in that hold for more than five minutes. I kept banging my leg on the mat, trying to get the feeling back. To the fans, it looked like I was struggling to escape the hold. The feeling eventually began to creep up my leg, but I still couldn't stand on it very well. Being the true professional he was, Jose helped me through the match and I limped back to the dressing room.

It was most fortunate that I was scheduled for the elusive "week off" that I rarely saw. My match with Jose was the last one I had before my break. I spent the week nursing my foot back to where I could stand on it without pain. Without that break, I'm sure I would have had to take the week off, anyway. As funny as it may seem now, I felt very lucky the injury happened when it did. I didn't miss any bookings and, more importantly, didn't disappoint the fans who would have been looking forward to seeing me defend the title in their town.

I really appreciate what Jose did for me that night. I also know the legion of today's fans can

thank Jose for helping bring another wrestling superstar into the ring to entertain and thrill them for the past several years. It was Jose who helped train and guide the early career of another future world heavyweight champion, "The Heartbreak Kid," Shawn Michaels.

Chapter 30
"The King is Dead, Long Live the King!"

By the spring of 1975, I had endured just about all I could take. I was exhausted both physically and mentally. I don't believe anyone can fully understand the type of pressure the champion is under unless they have held that belt for a period of time. The endless travel, endless opponents, and endless headaches caused by so many of the promoters I had to deal with — and more and more, a longing for home — made me realize my run as the world champion was nearly over.

I was more than ready to drop the title and let someone else have it. I approached the NWA with my request to give up the world title, but all I ever heard from them was, "Yeah, yeah, Jack. Okay. We'll take care of it." But they never

did. They were making too much money with me as the world champion for them to be in any hurry to pass the belt along. It was to their advantage to keep me as champion. I was drawing big crowds in arenas all over the world, doing broadways nearly every night, and making money for everybody who promoted under the NWA banner. When I won the title, the belt weighed ten pounds, but it seemed to weigh 50 times that. For the first time in my life, my focus was on losing the title, and not winning or defending it. At that point, I wasn't even sure I wanted to continue to wrestle. It had been the focus of my life for more than 25 years, and I needed to catch my breath.

Muchnick, and later Barnett, were reaping the three percent of the gates where I defended the title, so they booked me seven days a week when they could and did everything within their power to do so. The more I pressed for a date to drop the belt, the bigger run-around I got from the board of directors. I knew Terry Funk was in line, but they didn't seem to be in any hurry to seriously discuss

the issue.

As it always had been, being next in line for the belt was strictly political. No champion rose to the throne without some measure of politics. Dory Funk Sr. had passed away 48 days before I won the title, but before he died, he pushed Terry and tried to persuade promoters to back him. Senior had convinced Eddie, Bob Geigel, and several other promoters to give Terry a run with the title before they passed it along to Harley. They even convinced me to push for Terry to succeed me. His father had desperately wanted Terry to have the belt so he could say his two sons were the only brothers to hold the NWA world heavyweight championship.

In the spring of 1975, the National Wrestling Alliance's board of directors held its annual meeting in Las Vegas to discuss business and decide, as it did every year, who the world champion would be in the upcoming year. I was going into my third year as champion and the board

was happy with me in that position. The reigning champion also was required to attend the meetings, but that year, I didn't go. I took the time off and spent the weekend in my boat on Lake Lanier (on the outskirts of Atlanta). I had let the NWA know I was taking the week off and that I didn't plan to be there. I'm not sure if they believed me or not, but they found out soon enough that I had been serious.

They went crazy trying to locate me. They called my house, my mother, and everybody they could think of who might know where I was. They even had people posted at the airport in the hopes of catching me trying to sneak into town. When they couldn't find me, it dawned on them how serious I was about giving up the belt and getting off the road. The vote for a new champion came down to Terry, Harley, and, I believe, Don Jardine, who wrestled as the Super Destroyer. The NWA never was in favor of having a masked wrestler hold the belt, so their decision came down to Terry and Harley. The promoters were deadlocked when Fritz came in and cast his vote for Terry, breaking

the tie and naming the new champion.

Terry had been in and out of Florida, so he had name value there, and there was no question that he was over in Amarillo. He also had recently won a tournament in Greensboro, North Carolina, for the U.S. heavyweight title that had been left vacant when Johnny Valentine's career ended after the plane crash. Terry defeated Paul Jones in the finals of a November 9, 1975 tournament, but lost the title to Paul two weeks later. Of course, that was done to build up Paul as a top contender for the NWA title after Terry won the belt.

After the convention, they wasted no time in choosing a date and venue for the title match, which turned out to be December 10, 1975 at the Convention Center in Miami. The match, however, was billed as me defending my title against Dory Jr. All the pre-match build up, the television interviews, radio and newspaper ads all pitched a special one-fall contest between the "current champion" and the "former champion." The

storyline garnered quite a bit more interest than just a match between me and Terry.

There were eight matches on the December 10 card with three others titles being defended before mine. When the bell rang for the main event, there was no one in the ring except for Sonny Myers, the referee. To build up the excitement, I waited a few minutes before I began a slow walk to the ring. The fans were perplexed since the champion never enters the ring first. The challenger enters the ring first and the champion comes out last.

While I paced back and forth in my corner of the ring, the fans all turned around and looked to be back for Dory to come out. A few minutes ticked by until, finally, the dressing room door opened and someone emerged and made his way towards the ring. It wasn't Dory. It was his younger brother, Terry.

Terry entered the ring, took the microphone, and went on to explain that Dory hadn't been able to

make his plane connections in Japan. He then challenged me for the title in his brother's stead. I grabbed the microphone and agreed. "If the National Wrestling Alliance will sanction this as a title match, I'll accept your challenge." It was wrestling drama at its best, but the best was yet to come.

The referee called the two of us to the center of the ring and gave us the instructions we had heard thousands of times. We glared at each other and returned to our respective corners, without shaking hands. The bell rang and the battle was on. Terry attacked right away, like a hungry lion just released from his cage. I was more cautious and countered every move Terry made. The match was a combination of scientific skill and brawling.

Terry had always been a brawler, but he was a good hand in the ring. We traded dropkicks, body slams, chops, and elbow drops. That night, I think we gave the 5,200 fans their money's worth. I wrestled like the defending champion who was

exhausted from the years of defending the title, while Terry wrestled like the determined challenger who senses the title was within his grasp for the first time.

At about the 20-minute mark, I dropped Funk with an elbow and went in for the kill. I grabbed his left leg and wrapped it around mine to set up the figure four. Terry, reaching up, grabbed my shoulder and rolled me over into a cradle. The referee knelt down and counted, "One, two, three." And with that, Terry Funk was the new world heavyweight wrestling champion ... and I couldn't have been happier.

We both had come a long way from the time, nine years earlier, when I had been putting him over in two minutes or less. It was a far cry from the time when we were standing together, somewhere on the desolate Texas plains, waiting for his wife to pick us up after he totaled their car. He was the champion now … and if I am to be totally honest, I was more than pleased to put him over that night.

After he pinned me, the referee handed him the title belt and he held it up over his head with both hands. As glad as I was to have the weight of the title lifted from me, it still was a bit strange to hear the ring announcer say, "The winner and new world heavyweight champion … Terry Funk," when you were the old one.

The only injury in the match came when Terry pinned me. Neither Terry nor I sustained the injury. It was referee Sonny Myers who did. As Sonny was counting, I extended my arm and accidentally hit him in the face. Terry had the title, I had my life back, and Sonny had a broken nose. It was a memorable night for all of us.

Of course, I was given the obligatory rematch with Terry. Although I put Funk over by letting him pin me cleanly, it had the same effect as if he had won the title by tainted measures. I was not supposed to wrestle Terry, but Dory that night in Miami. I had trained for Dory, not a match with Terry, whose styles were completely different. It

also was a one-fall match and most sanctioned title matches were set for two-out-of-three falls.

To a lot of the fans, I was almost robbed of the title; not quite, but almost. It gave Terry his first top challenger — the man he took the title from, me. We had our first rematch a week later on Tuesday, December 16 at the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory back home in Tampa. This match lasted a little longer than the first. I put Terry over in 35 minutes. I didn't want the title back and I certainly wasn't going to take it back a week after I lost it.

I don't think I had ever been more relieved in my life than after that night in Miami. I wrestled Terry twice in the coming week, on December 16 in Tampa and in Atlanta on December 19. With those two obligatory rematches out of the way, I was more than ready for some vacation time. Terry picked up the bookings I had "signed" when I was champion, which consisted primarily of Kansas City, Atlanta and Florida. I decided to take six weeks off, rest up, and then go back to work. I

was still living in Atlanta, but I wanted to move back to Tampa. There no longer was any need for me to live in a specific place just because of the ease of travel. I still would be traveling, but to nowhere near the extent I had been while I was the champion. I could finally live anywhere I wanted and not worry about being near a major airport.

Chapter 31
The Heel Turn

There also was another good reason I needed to be in Tampa. About a year before I lost the title, Gerry and I had invested in an automobile paint-and-body shop. We both knew we eventually would be out of the ring and we would need something to do. Our older brother, Bill, had owned a body shop in Texas, and then moved to Tampa where he managed a couple of local body shops. We thought it would be a good business, so we hired Bill to manage the Brisco Brothers Body Shop.

The timing couldn't have been better. The body shop was struggling, as many new businesses do, so I took my time off to begin knocking on insurance companies' doors in the hopes of picking up business for our company. I knew very little about how insurance claims worked, so I was

eager to learn. I would set up appointments with the various insurance agencies and I (or Gerry and I) would visit with them. I must say, it certainly did work to our advantage to have had such a following in Florida. We had little trouble getting appointments to see the folks we needed. We would go in to talk about our new venture and, in more cases than not, they would want to talk about wrestling. They would take us around their offices and introduce us to everyone.

Other than that, I just took it easy for awhile. I rested, which is what I needed most after more than a decade on the road, and especially after more than two years as champion.

After awhile, a silly rumor got started among the boys that I had become some sort of recluse; kind of a modern-day Howard Hughes, complete with the beard, long hair, and mandarin-like fingernails. Nothing could have been further from the truth. I was feeling the best I had in years, and if anyone really wanted to see me to learn the truth,

I wasn't all that hard to find. All they had to do was to drop by my house or my office at Brisco Brothers. Howard Hughes … that one still makes me laugh.

It had taken most of my time off just to begin feeling like a whole human being again. I couldn't even look at a plane without a feeling of dread. But by the end of January 1976, I was feeling much better, and I thought it was time for me to get back into the ring. I spent the better part of the next three years wrestling in the Florida territory, but as a former champion, I was still in demand by promoters across the country. They wanted me to come back to their territories to wrestle their top guys and put them over, much like I did to set up my championship run. That also would help set up matches for Terry to come in and defend his title against "the man who beat the former world champion." It may seem strange for a former champion to do jobs to benefit the man who succeeded him as champion, but that's the way the business worked. Dory and Harley did it

for me and I was happy to do the same for Terry.

From 1976 through 1982, I made occasional one-shot appearances in St. Louis, Houston, San Francisco, Greensboro, Mobile, Puerto Rico, Kansas City, New Orleans, New York, Atlanta, and even Memphis and Louisville for Jerry Lawler, as well as a quick trip to Japan where I wrestled Jumbo Tsuruta in the finals of a tournament for the United National title. I also wrestled Terry in many of the towns in Florida, as well as Dothan [AL], Amarillo, Abilene, and St. Louis. From 1978 through 1980, Gerry and I spent the months of November and December splitting our time between Atlanta and Tampa.

For the most part, though, I worked for Eddie Graham in my old stomping grounds. I had very lucrative offers from all over, but I wanted to stay close to home and work my own schedule, rather than my schedule working me.

During this time, I made what I believe was an

important, and lucrative, suggestion to Eddie.

The matches always began (what we refer to as "bell time") at was 8:30 in the evening. There usually were six to eight matches on a card, so most of the time, it was after eleven o'clock before the main event ended, and on occasion, close to midnight.

Now and then, Eddie would have us arrive early to do an autograph session for the fans. I always enjoyed that. It gave us an opportunity to meet the people who were paying our salaries and giving us the opportunity to make a living doing what we loved to do more than anything. During that time, I would try to engage them, as much as possible, in conversation about what they liked about what we were doing so we could make sure they were getting their hard-earned dollar's worth.

One point that kept coming up was how late the matches started, and more to the point, how late they ended. It was hard for people to get up and go

to work the next day when they didn't get home until after midnight. More important was the fact that they couldn't bring their children to the matches. They just couldn't stay up that late and function the next day at school. Children had always been a big part of our audience and I thought we were missing the boat because we were missing a sizeable portion of our audience.

In 1979, I talked to Eddie about it and tried to convince him to change the time of the opening match from 8:30 to eight o'clock. Eddie reacted the way I thought he would. He hated the idea. "We always started at eight-thirty and the crowds are good," Eddie argued. "Why should we change?"

Eddie was a hard man to convince, but, as I stated before, he was a smart businessman and eventually agreed to give it a try. The time, territory-wide, was moved back to eight o'clock. In fact, Eddie liked the idea so much that he changed the opening bell in Orlando to 7:30 p.m. The crowds nearly

doubled as a result. Not only were there more children, but more families; more men, more women, all of which resulted in more money. More money for Eddie, that is. As in the past, when the houses grew, our payoffs didn't reflect the substantial increase in revenue.

The body shop and limited travel wasn't the only reason I was glad to be back in Tampa. Shortly after I lost the title, I met the love of my life — Jan Lauder. I was going out one evening and had just entered a local night club when I bumped into Jan, who was leaving. She was supposed to have met some friends, but they didn't show up. I recognized her from an earlier meeting with her brother, with whom I was friends. I asked her to go back in with me and have a beer. She had been a wrestling fan, but the problem was … she was a fan of Gerry, not me. I had a new challenge before me; convincing Jan that she liked the wrong Brisco. It didn't take long to do that and we began to date, which we did for four years until we got married in 1980.

In 1981, I ran into Jim Crockett during a trip to Japan. We had dinner and he asked me to consider coming into the Carolinas to work for him. I told him I would like to do that, but I wasn't sure when I would be able to do that. I had been working close to home for the previous five years and if I decided I wanted to take a week off, I'd simply tell Eddie and he wouldn't book me. I told him I was ready to work a more full schedule, but I wasn't sure just how I wanted to go about it.

Gerry had a great run in the Carolinas during the early '70s, teaming up with Sandy Scott, and later, Thunderbolt Patterson. He eventually moved on to compete more in singles matches and, in 1981, he won the NWA world junior heavyweight title from Les Thornton. The Funks may be able to say they are the only two brothers to hold the NWA world heavyweight title, but I can proudly say Gerry and I are the only two brothers to hold the NWA world title in two separate weight divisions.

There is an interesting story behind Gerry's run

as the NWA junior heavyweight champ. Of course, Gerry never could challenge me for the heavyweight title when I held it, so my run with the title pretty much took him out of the title picture. It was the same for Terry when Dory held the belt. As with Terry, Gerry was deserving of being given opportunities to challenge for the title, not to mention actually holding the title. For that reason, Eddie and George Scott [along with Jim Barnett] came up with the idea of making the NWA world junior heavyweight championship more of a regional title, much like LeRoy McGuirk did decades before in the Oklahoma territory. They would use it as their main singles title in Georgia, Florida, and the Mid-Atlantic territories. That being the case, there was no one better to carry that tremendous responsibility than Gerry. Gerry's reputation and skills were known world-wide and promoters everywhere were vying for him to be in their main events, so the world junior heavyweight title was a perfect avenue for everyone,

He took the title from Les Thornton in Orlando on

September 13, 1981. As good as the plan seemed for everyone, there was one thing wrong. That was Jim Crockett. Jim was the only one who vetoed the idea. He thought Gerry holding the NWA world junior heavyweight title would diminish the value of his Mid-Atlantic and U.S. heavyweight titles. Gerry had been working in Charlotte and Crockett just wouldn't have it, especially if one of his biggest stars wouldn't be available to appear on the cards he wanted Gerry to be booked. Gerry had bigger plans set for the Mid-Atlantic area and we wanted to work together as a tag team again, so Gerry dropped the title back to Les in Knoxville on October 16.

Throughout our careers, Gerry and I teamed up occasionally. At this point in our careers, we decided we wanted to finish our career together as a tag team. I couldn't think of a better way to leave the ring than with my brother as a partner. We called Jim Crockett in Charlotte and worked out a deal. By April 1982, a few weeks later, we were in Charlotte with plans to stay there for about six

months. Things went so well, we were there for two full years.

Before Gerry and I went to Charlotte on a full-time basis, I made a few shots there as a single. The territory was hot with established stars such as Wahoo McDaniel, Ric Flair, Ray Stevens, Ivan Koloff, and Paul Jones, as well as new stars like Rick Steamboat, Sgt. Slaughter, Jay Youngblood, and "Rowdy" Roddy Piper.

I had been a big fan of Roddy Piper for a number of years prior to going to the Carolinas. He had been working for us in Georgia as a co-announcer with Gordon Solie. If there was anyone better on the microphone doing commentary or interviews, I don't know who it was. He was all energy and talent and he was a great hand in the ring. The rowdy one's real name was Roderick Toombs and he grew up in Canada. He had a troubled home life and left home before his fifteenth birthday. He took to the ring to earn money after gaining a reputation as a terror on the amateur mat and his

first professional match was against veteran Larry "The Axe" Hennig.

At fifteen, he earned the hefty sum of $25 for the ten seconds he spent in the ring with Hennig. He moved from territory to territory, but didn't do much more than wrestle as a jobber and journeyman, but his positive (and contagious) attitude, stick-to-itiveness, and innate talent, drew everyone to him and brought him under their wing. He caught fire when he moved west to Don Owen's territory in the Pacific Northwest and then down to Los Angeles for Mike LeBell after George Scott saw him in Oregon. It was until the jobber went to the Mid-Atlantic area that he became a superstar. He won the NWA United States heavyweight title from Ric Flair and drew money with everyone he wrestled. Piper and I had a great program going, trading the Mid-Atlantic strap back and forth twice. I also lost it twice to "Number One" Paul Jones, but won it back each time. I don't think I ever saw a title change hands so often. From May until October 1982, the Mid-

Atlantic belt changed hands seven times. I held it a total of four times. My last run with the belt was from October 18, 1982 through January 23, 1983, when I put Dory over for the belt in Charlotte.

Piper, of course, went on to become the top heel with the WWF in the early '80s, a period that sent Vince's company into the stratosphere. When Roddy finished his run in the Mid-Atlantic, he wrestled for us in Georgia and Florida. He told me he really liked Atlanta, but he wanted to go to New York to work for Vince and see how that would go. He made the right choice. He went on to be top card at the first WrestleMania and had a successful career in movies and television.

Charlotte was the first territory I worked as a full-fledged heel. As the world champion, I played the heel role on occasion when I was wrestling the local favorites. We could have wrestled one of the most scientific matches in history, but the fans still saw me as the heel because I was wrestling their favorite son. In those cases, I would be more

aggressive and push the rules a bit. I have to admit, it was a lot of fun. I wasn't a bad guy, but I could draw heat by being slow on the break, or by throwing an extra elbow after being warned by the referee. In the Mid-Atlantic territory, however, Gerry and I could have some fun and work as the top heel tag team in the area.

The top babyface team in the area was the combination of Jay Youngblood [Steven Romero] and Rick Steamboat [Richard Blood]. They had held the world tag team title twice since October 1979 and were in their third title run when we began our program with them in May 1983. Jay Youngblood, like Chief Jay Strongbow, wasn't an Indian. He was one of the sons of wrestling patriarch Ricky Romero, a Mexican who had been a top drawing card for the Funks in West Texas.

Jay had the fans eating out of his hand in the Carolinas. Based on the screams that came from the women when he and Ricky walked to the ring, they were like the second coming of the

Beatles. Jay could have had a long and illustrious career, but his life was cut short in Australia on September 2, 1985. His death certificate said he had a heart attack, but we knew better. A heart attack to such a healthy young man at the age of 30 happens, but not often. His heart may have stopped, but I don't think it was by natural causes.

Richard Blood had been born in Honolulu, Hawaii, lived in St. Petersburg, and trained with Verne Gagne in Minneapolis. Rick had been using the name Rick Pesek, after John Pesek, the "Nebraska Tigerman," who had held a version of the world heavyweight title in 1937. Pesek was awarded the old National Wrestling Association title because he had been the only contender able to come up with the $1,000 bond for the title. He held the belt for a year before he was stripped of the title.

Rick introduced himself to me one night when he was working the opening match on a card in Florida. He grew up in St. Petersburg, won the

Florida State high-school amateur wrestling championship, and had been a big fan of pro wrestling since he was a kid. I was working on the same card when my brother Gerry came up to me and asked, "Did you see the new kid in the dressing room?" I told him I hadn't and walked into the dressing room to see him. When I saw him, I thought, "This kid is going to make it."

He just had that look … the build, long hair, the tan. I knew he wouldn't be working curtain-jerkers for long. He told me his name was Richard Blood and said I had been his idol when he was growing up. I laughed and told him that wouldn't get him very far. I also said he had to do something about his name.

I left the dressing room and returned with Eddie Graham. I wanted him to meet Rick. Eddie agreed when I told him the name Richard Blood had to go. Eddie, who had known Pesek, said, "You don't look anything like Pesek, but you know who you remind me of? Sam Mokuahi." I agreed and

said that's who he should be.

Now, even the most ardent fan may not remember Sam Mokuahi, but they all remember Sam Steamboat, a great star of the '50s and '60s. So, Richard Blood became Ricky Steamboat.

He didn't stay in Florida long. He moved back to Georgia and worked in preliminaries and mid-card matches. When George Scott saw him, he quickly brought him into Charlotte to help with the rebuilding of Crockett Promotions. Rick was an instant hit and really went over when he pinned Ric Flair on television in Raleigh for the Mid-Atlantic TV title. Years later, he moved on to work for Vince and was dubbed "The Dragon." He had one of the top matches of all time when he defeated Randy Savage for the Intercontinental heavyweight title at WrestleMania III. He later returned to the NWA and took the world heavyweight title from Flair in Chicago on February 20, 1989.

Gerry and I had actually worked as a "heel team" a few times in the past. When I say "heel team," I'm not saying we worked heel like the Andersons, Hawk and Hanson, the Infernos, or other teams who re-defined the term "villain" in the wrestling world, but what we did was just crank up the intensity in the ring a bit. We did it in Amarillo against Dory and Terry, but where it really worked well was in Florida against the Florida tag team champions, Mike Graham and Steve Keirn.

In December 1977, I was still wrestling part-time in Florida in both singles and tag team matches with Gerry when I received a call from Eddie Graham asking us to work a babyface match with Steve and Mike. Eddie was setting up a show at the University of Florida as a fund raiser to start a wrestling team at the school. Of course, we were happy to do it for Eddie and to help amateur wrestling at UF. As Gerry and I were driving to the match, we talked about what we would do that night. The more we talked about it, the more boring the match sounded. "Why don't we wrestle

more aggressive tonight," I asked Gerry, "like we did in Amarillo? "Eddie will still have his babyface match, but it will be a lot more fun for us and the fans will love it."

Gerry loved the idea, but we decided we wouldn't tell Eddie, Mike or Steve. We would just go into the ring and, as the match built up, we would turn up the heat and bend the rules a bit. I have to say it did surprise Keirn and Graham, but the fans and Eddie loved it. By the end of the match, Eddie wanted to book the four of us everywhere.

We drew great crowds in all the towns as we battled over the U.S. tag team title. We even took our feud to Puerto Rico and the Bahamas, and drew 10,000 fans one night in St. Martin's.

So now, back in the Mid-Atlantic, as we began our program with Steamboat and Youngblood for the world tag team title, we thought we could do as well, if not better, with the "heel turn" as we did in

Florida. We took the idea to Jim Crockett. He was somewhat doubtful, but he said, "Let's give it a chance."

Our program would begin as two babyface teams and we would work an angle where we would turn during a televised match. Having a title on the line on television was a rarity at the time. We wrestled cleanly for most of the match, trading move for move at breakneck speed, with neither team getting the advantage. As the time limit was getting close to expiring, the frustration on all our parts began to show.

When the time came, I caught Steamboat in the figure four. He hung on and refused to give up. When Youngblood came in to save him, Gerry tried to stop him, only to have the referee, Tommy Young, push him back. In the skirmish, Gerry fell back and landed on us, putting additional pressure on Rick's legs. Tommy ruled the match "no contest," but the fans were murmuring that Gerry falling on my figure four had been no

accident. Youngblood and Steamboat claimed the same, while Gerry and I pleaded our innocence. There was only one thing left to do. Have a rematch the following week on television.

The return match was more of the same. It was scientific from the opening bell, with the advantage going back and forth between us. This time, Gerry had Steamboat in the figure four at the end of the match, and as before, Youngblood came in to break the hold. Ever vigilant, Tommy Young turned to push Jay out of the ring. When his back was turned, I came into the ring, leaped into the air, and landed across Rick's knees, only to have Tommy Young turn around in time to catch my illegal move. He disqualified us and gave the match to Steamboat and Youngblood.

And there we were … instant heels.

I have to say again, it was great fun working as a heel. Being the bad guy, you can do and say the

most outrageous things. In fact, the more outrageous, the better. Professional wrestling is a combination of athleticism and theater. The more you are able to do in and out of the ring, and the more you can exaggerate the moves or "out-of-the-ring antics," the more vivid you are with the fans as a heel. When you combine that with the fact that the Briscos had always fought cleanly, and defended their respective titles against all comers while adhering to the rules, it made us all the better heels.

The fans hated us. How could their former heroes turn and dish out such treachery on two nice, young, handsome champions like Ricky Steamboat and Jay Youngblood?

The plan was to build up our feud and allow it to culminate as the second main event on the first wrestling card known as Starrcade. The event was held in Greensboro on Thanksgiving night, November 24, 1983, and was broadcast via closed circuit to venues in three states. The first main

event was a cage match between defending world heavyweight champion Harley Race and former champion Ric Flair. Race had defeated Flair that previous June in St. Louis in a controversial ending, setting up the program that would end in a rematch at Starrcade. With rugged Gene Kiniski as special guest referee, Flair took back the title, and gained the additional significance of being the first man to win the world heavyweight title in a steel cage.

To build up our match for Steamboat and Youngblood's title, we continued the verbal attack on them and they retaliated in fine form, saying we had our day and we had been fine athletes in years past, but they were the champions for today. One of the best angles took place during an interview when Youngblood came out wearing a full Indian headdress. That was nothing new in the business. As long as there have been Indian chiefs in the ring, there have been bonnets to give them additional color, not to mention the perfect gimmick for a heel to grab and tear up in front of a

crowd.

Since Jay, Gerry and I were Indians — Jay in the eyes of the fans and Gerry and me in reality — I thought of a new twist to the old angle. Steamboat and Youngblood appeared on camera carrying the gold world title belts and Jay wearing the bonnet. Jay explained how one of the chiefs of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma awarded him the headdress because he was a true warrior, albeit not a Cherokee. As he explained the significance of the honor, Gerry and I walked onto the set and told him he didn't deserve the bonnet. We proceeded to sucker punch him and steal the headdress. Rather than destroy it, though — as the fans would expect — I put it on Gerry. In the weeks ahead, he would wear it to the ring and dance around, while Steamboat and Youngblood stood in their corner, trying to think of a way to get it back. In many ways, their reacquisition of the headdress became more important to them than the world tag team title.

We won the world tag-team title from Steamboat and Youngblood on June 18, 1983 in Greenville [SC], lost it back to them in the same town on October 3, and took it back one more time two weeks later in Richmond. At Starrcade, we were the defending champions and we put them over for the title for the final time.

Gerry and I had one more run with the NWA world tag team title when we defeated defending champions Wahoo McDaniel and Mark Youngblood [Jay's younger brother, Mark Romero] in Spartanburg [SC] on April 4, 1984, and dropped it back to them in Richmond three weeks later. Gerry and I knew that was probably going to be it for us in the Charlotte territory. We had done everything we could possibly do in both singles and tag team matches. We knew it was time to move on again. We weren't in a hurry, but we decided to keep our options open.

Chapter 32
Son of a Gynecologist

In my opinion, the only person who can accurately judge the world heavyweight champion is one who actually held the title himself. The fans can do it to a certain extent, and certainly, the promoters to another. Wrestlers can judge the champion by being in the ring with them, but only a man who has held the title can truly measure a champion.

One of Robert Kennedy's favorite poems reads, "Bullfight critics ranked in rows, crowd the enormous arena full. But only one is there who knows, and he's the one who fights the bull." Like a handful of those who held the title, I fought the bull. In other words, I defended the championship night after night.

There are few wrestlers who, upon achieving the

world title, can personify the title. It takes much more than just wearing the belt to have the world at large "see" you as the champion. There have been a few men, however, who have been able to almost breathe in the championship and have it transcend what they do in the ring to the public image of them. Lou Thesz did it in the way he spoke and carried himself. When he entered an arena, or even just a room, there was no doubt that he was the champion. He walked with a dignity that only a champion has. He spoke quietly, humbly, and treated everyone he met with kindness and respect.

Dory did the same thing, but in his own way. He treated the title with respect. While he was champion, he would appear in a coat and tie for interviews and when he arrived at an arena to defend the title. He wore the belt with respect, as Lou had. You would never see Dory dragging the belt on the floor behind him as he made his way to the ring. The belt meant something to him, to the fans, and to all of us. It represented the highest achievement one could aspire to in the sport. We

all aspired to it, and when Dory wore the belt in the ring, he honored us all.

That is not to say there weren't other great champions in the ring. Harley had a more rugged persona. Gene Kiniski was somewhere in-between. But Lou and Dory are the first ones who come to mind when I think about what it really means to "be" a champion. There have been others, but those two top my list.

One other name springs to mind when I think of the personification of the world heavyweight title, and that would be the "Nature Boy," Ric Flair. If there was a king of charisma, it was Ric. All through his championship reigns (promoted as fifteen or sixteen, but more like 25, I think), he brought the title to a level the fans loved. His flamboyant style, his thousand-dollar suits, Rolex watches, and $10,000 to $20,000 ring robes made him the champion as much (or possibly more) as his skills in the ring. He took the helm of the championship during the 1980s, and he personified

the title in the terms of the day: affluence, style, and arrogance.

When Ric "walked that aisle with that ten pounds of gold" (as he would say), shook his long blond hair, and shouted "Whooo," the fans would echo "Whooo" back. He was over like no one I had ever seen. If there was a man born to the title, a man for the times, that man was Ric Flair.

That wasn't always the case, though. If you studied the first year of Ric's ring career, you might have thought he was destined to be a jobber, if he was to remain in the business at all. He probably was not the person you would have picked to be a future world champion.

He was born Richard Fliehr on February 25, 1949 in Memphis, to a home of some privilege. His father, Richard, was a gynecologist, and his mother, Kay, was a leading patron of the arts. As a young child, Dr. Fliehr moved his family to Edina, Minnesota, a suburb of

Minneapolis. Ric attended a private military school in Wisconsin and won the state wrestling championship in the heavyweight division in 1967. He returned to Minnesota to play football for the Golden Gophers, but soon realized the gridiron and the world of academia were not where his interests lay.

Like me, Ric had been a wrestling fan since his boyhood, and growing up in Minnesota, he cut his teeth on Gagne, Dick the Bruiser, and the Crusher, the wrestler who made Milwaukee famous. He knew early on what he wanted to do. He wanted to be a wrestler. I'm sure that wasn't the choice of careers the Fliehrs wanted for their son, but I do know for a fact they were sitting ringside when their only child took the world heavyweight championship from Dusty Rhodes in Memorial Hall in Kansas City, Kansas on September 17, 1981.

With neither medical school nor the NFL looming large in his future, Ric decided to take a chance

and go into professional wrestling. He had known Verne's son, Greg, in college, and had been rooming with Ken Patera, who was training to enter the ring. He approached Verne about training and was told he could be a part of the next class, which included Patera, Jim Brunzell, Khosrow Vaziri (who later became the Iron Sheik), and the late Chris Taylor, the 1972 Olympic wrestling medalist from Iowa State University.

There is no doubt that Verne and Billy Robinson worked the boys hard. So hard, in fact, that Ric initially quit to look for an easier line of work. To his credit, Ric returned and finished his training. He made his debut against George "Scrap Iron" Gadaski on December 10, 1972 in the little town of Rice Lake, Wisconsin.

Verne used Ric, as he did a lot of the boys he trained, as fodder for his son, so Ric spent a great deal of his first eighteen months in the business losing to Greg and a host of others. He did manage a few wins and a few draws, but not many. His

opportunity came about, however, when George Scott and the Crocketts were rebuilding the Mid-Atlantic territory. Wahoo had known Ric from the AWA and told him they were looking for new talent down south. Ric packed his bags and left for Charlotte.

When he arrived there, he weighed close to 300 pounds, sported short brown hair, and had an idea: a new town and a new chance called for a new character. He told George he wanted to be "Cowboy" Ric Flair. George didn't see it that way. He saw him as a reincarnation of former world champion Buddy Rogers, the original "Nature Boy." Flair cut down to 232 pounds, let his hair grow out, bleached it blond, and became the "Nature Boy" to an entire new generation of wrestling fans.

The first time I wrestled in a singles match — in St. Louis in Kiel Auditorium on March 7, 1980 — there was no doubt in my mind that he would have the title one day. Even though I no longer had the

title, I still was traveling to St. Louis regularly and drawing well. Ric was just beginning the long uphill climb to the championship. He had been top card for the Crocketts and was being booked nationally to enhance his reputation, gain more experience against top guys in other territories, and to set up a title run in the future.

Our match was billed as the battle of the figure fours, since both of us used that hold as our finisher, and Pat O'Connor was the special referee. We went two out of three falls with me putting him over in about 45 minutes.

Sam paid the boys on the spot in cash after the matches. That night, Ric and I both received $2,200 and we left Kiel. I headed back to my hotel room. There was an early flight the next morning to Tampa and I had already purchased my ticket. Ric took another road. He was young, single, and had no intentions of sitting around an empty hotel room for the remainder of the evening. He had a little group that followed him

around in St. Louis and they all went to East St. Louis and partied all night. What would you expect from the Nature Boy?

About 6:30 the next morning, there was a knock at my door. I opened it … and there was Flair. I don't think he had been to bed. He told me he had been out all night. "Boy, we had a great time last night. I think I drank a million Kamikazes. Last night, I didn't think I was drinking all that much, but I spent all my money. I promised my kids up in Minnesota that I would go up and see them from here. Could you lend me some money so I can get up and see them?"

I liked Ric, so I gave him a thousand dollars. I didn't usually lend money to the boys. In most cases, when you do, you will never see it again, but I trusted Ric. He proved to be as good as his word because he paid me back every cent.

Ric was a great guy, but in his younger years, he could go through money with the same skill and

flamboyance he displayed in the ring. I had been told Ric could spend more money in an evening than most of us could spend in a month. He lived the "Nature Boy" image to the hilt; renting airplanes and limousines. He was the "Nature Boy" in and out of the ring.

I am not sure if Ric ever took a draw on his payoff, but nothing he did would have surprised me. Taking a draw was not uncommon. A lot of the boys would take money upfront against their payoff. I never would do that. There were too many promoters who had ways to make your money disappear. When I got paid, I wanted to see my money all in one place and all at one time.

As I speak now of Ric, he has been in the ring for more than 30 years, and still draws the fans into the arenas. He has weathered many storms in the wrestling business and always was willing to put someone over for the good of whatever promotion he worked for. I had many great matches with him when he held the NWA title and he put me over

more than once to build up our live shows.

There was one more champion I met before he won the title. In fact, we met before he began wrestling. Terry Bollea was playing bass guitar in a rock band at a local Tampa bar when I first met him. He couldn't have been more than 21 years old at the time. It wasn't long after I dropped the title to Terry Funk that I went out with some friends and they talked me into going to this particular bar to hear a band. I had just come in off the road and I was tired, so I tried to beg off and stay home. They were pretty convincing, though, and told me they weren't about to take no for an answer. I finally gave in and agreed to go along. They kept talking about the band and this one bass player they said I just had to see.

When we walked in, it took a minute or so for my eyes to adjust to the change in light. When I finally could see again, I looked towards the back of the bar where the band was playing. There, on the stage, was one of the biggest guys I had ever

seen. He looked to be about six-foot-seven and probably weighed close to 275 pounds of pure muscle. I later learned that, besides being a bass player, he had been a bodybuilder for years, which was most evident.

"Oh, my god. Who is that?" I asked.

"Oh, that's Terry Bollea," one of the girls with us said. "He's a friend of mine."

"You know him?"

"Yeah"

"Well, please go and ask him, when they go on a break, if he will mind coming over to our table. I would like to meet him and talk to him for a couple of minutes."

When they took a break, he came over to our table and I asked him to join us for a beer. I told him he was one of the most impressive guys I had seen and asked if he had ever thought of becoming a

professional wrestler. He was quiet and somewhat shy. He said he was nervous about meeting me because he had been a fan of mine and had followed my career, and wrestling in general, since he was a kid. He used to go to the armory in Tampa and even drove to Orlando to watch me wrestle. To answer my question, he said being a professional wrestler was all he had wanted to do as far back as he could remember.

I asked him to meet me the following morning at Eddie Graham's office in the Sportatorium and we would see what we could do to get him started in the ring. I was part owner of the Florida territory and I was always looking for new talent. That night, I thought that, with a little luck, I had hit a gold mine. And to think I had wanted to stay home and watch television.

I don't know what time Terry arrived at Eddie's office the next morning, but when I walked in at nine o'clock, he was already there. I introduced him to Eddie and to Hiro Matsuda, who also held

an interest in the territory and served as our top trainer.

Hiro was a fantastic worker and one of the best technicians I had ever seen. He originally came from Yokohama, Japan, where he was born Yasuhiro Kojima, and came to America in the early ‘60s to pursue a wrestling career. He traveled through the Texas and Oklahoma territories before finding a home in Tampa. He held nearly every regional title imaginable, as well as two runs of being the NWA world junior heavyweight champion, defeating Ken Mantel and my idol, Danny Hodge.

He was an amazing athlete and his two title reigns were an unbelievable eleven years apart. If there was one place Hiro was tougher than in an actual match, it was in the ring training aspiring wrestlers. He not only trained Terry, he also trained other stars, including Paul Orndorff, Brian Blair, Lex Luger, Ron Simmons, and Steve Keirn. Brian Blair says the training Hiro put him

and the boys through was brutal and called the training facilities in the Sportatorium "the dungeon."

Hiro passed away on November 27, 1999 of liver and colon cancer. He was 62 years old. We all miss him.

When Terry walked into the office, both Eddie and Hiro closed their mouths. Hiro immediately took him to the dungeon. Now, I have heard criticism about Terry from fans who think they are in the know. They criticize Terry for not being tough, or having been handed an easy road into the business. Let me set the record straight here; Terry had to work just as hard as anyone coming into the business. His size may have gotten him through the door, but everything he did after that was all him. Hiro didn't give it to him. Terry had to work hard for it. In fact, Hiro accidentally broke Terry's leg during training. Terry was tough, though. He kept coming back.

Johnny Valentine was doing the booking in Florida for us then. He was confined to his wheelchair most of the time due to the injuries sustained from the airplane crash in North Carolina. I managed to convince Johnny to book Terry in a few matches around the territory. For some reason, Johnny didn't like him. I don't know if John was jealous of Terry or what, but he didn't give him much of a shot. Whatever it was, he kept Terry from having the opportunity to get over in his hometown. Terry only worked in Florida for ten weeks before his bookings dried up

Terry got involved with some other things after that, until more than a year later, I helped him get booked in Tennessee. I had done some work with Jerry Lawler in Memphis, and had made title shots for him on some of his shows. I knew he would freak out when he saw Terry. I called Jerry and he told me to send him up. Terry didn't have any money, so I bought him his first pair of boots, trunks, and gave him $100 for gas and expenses.

The wrestling fans in Tennessee loved Terry. Lawler always seemed to like unusual names, so Terry became the "Hulk" and they billed him as Terry "The Hulk" Boulder. That certainly was a harbinger of things to come. Boulder came from his size, I guess; boulders were big and so was Terry. The Hulk part leaves little guess work. Terry went to Memphis in May 1979, and one of the top television shows during that time was a program based on the Marvel Comics superhero, The Incredible Hulk, starring Lou Ferrigno and Bill Bixby.

After sending Terry off to Memphis, I was booked on a four-week tour of Japan. While there, I ran into Freddie Blassie, Vince McMahon, Sr., and his wife as they were coming through Tokyo. They had come to the matches and were staying in the same hotel where I was staying. We all had dinner together one night and I told them about Terry.

Vince was interested in what he was hearing and

told me, "Jack, whenever he's ready to come to New York, you call me." I told him I would and that I would call Terry the next day and tell him about our conversation. By that time, Terry had moved on to Georgia, where he was given a new ring name … Sterling Golden. As I promised, I called Terry the next day and asked him if he would like to go to New York and work for the McMahons. I also told him they would take care of him up there. Terry said, "Oh, no, Jack. I'm not ready for that. Not yet." I told him that was okay, but when he was ready, he should give me a call.

That was smart — very smart — on Terry's part. He was right. There was no way he was ready at that point. He was still green. If he had gone to New York then, he may not have made it and washed out. He stayed in the south for another three months.

Later, he called and said he thought he was ready to move on and try his luck in New York. I called Vince and he told me to send him up. He went up

to the WWF and received another ring name; one that would stay this time. Vince Sr. called him "Hulk Hogan" and gave him his WWF debut (and win) in Madison Square Garden against the not-quite-yet "Million Dollar Man," Ted DeBiase.

He did well in the WWF, but he only stayed for a short period of time. Even having waited, I don't think the timing was right. He left New York for Minneapolis, but he did it the right way. He left on good terms and left the door open to return some time in the future, if and when the opportunity presented itself. In the world of wrestling, it usually does sooner or later.

Hulk Hogan did well working for Verne as far as a career move goes. He was pushed as a top babyface and heir to the AWA throne held by Nick Bockwinkel. He made some inroads in Japan and landed a role as "Thunder Lips" in Sylvester Stallone's Rocky III movie. He returned to the WWF in late 1983 and, within a few weeks, defeated the Iron Sheik for the WWF title. The

Iron Sheik had held it only a few days after defeating long-time champion Bob Backlund.

That was the beginning of Hulk-A-Mania, a new era of wrestling, and the dawning of sports entertainment. Whatcha gonna do?

Chapter 33
Corporate Subterfuge

When I got into the wrestling business, it didn't take me long to figure out who made the real money. The world champion and the top boys in the better territories all made good money, but top stars would come and go. They might get injured, lose their drawing power in a territory, or fall out of favor with a promoter and end up back in the preliminaries.

It was the men who owned and promoted the territories who made the lion's share of the money. No matter how much the wrestlers made, you can bet the promoters took home much more than any of us, so I made up my mind early in my career that I wanted to buy into a territory and be part owner. I figured I could still wrestle and pull in part of the gate as an owner, as well.

I had acquired ten percent of Georgia Championship Wrestling before my championship run. It was offered to me when I came there to help bail out Lester Welch and Paul Jones [the promoter] when the wrestlers all left to join Ann Gunkel. They sold me ten percent for next to nothing in order to get me to stay and work with them to rebuild the territory. After I won the world title, Barnett offered me another ten percent, which gave me 20 percent of the company. Gerry bought some stock from Buddy Colt and some from Barnett, which amounted to ten percent.

The promotion ran shows in Georgia, Tennessee, Ohio, and Michigan. It looked like a good deal to Gerry and me and we believed it would benefit us well financially. The key to Georgia Championship Wrestling was WTBS, which later became the TBS Superstation. It was one of the first cable-television stations to broadcast coast to coast and wrestling was one of its highest-rated shows. Of course, the station was owned by Ted Turner and, fortunately for us, Ted loved

wrestling. He and Barnett were friends and Jim had been running his shows on Ted's station since the late 1960s.

Cable television changed the landscape of wrestling. In the territory days before cable, we would work in smaller markets and give our tapes to any number of local television stations. The promoters would supply the shows to the stations for free and they, in turn, would sell the commercial airtime. In a good territory, there would be a four or five-year wait to buy an advertising spot on the wrestling program. The promoters would use the shows to build up interest in the programs between the wrestlers and to draw the paying fans to the local arenas for the matches. It proved to be a great system. Promoters got the vehicle they needed to push their wrestlers at no expense and the local stations received popular and profitable programming for no cost. Cable television put an end to that.

Cable took local wrestling nationwide. We saw the benefit for the sport almost immediately. While most of the promoters were wondering how to handle the new phenomenon, much like the promoters of the '30s and '40s had to deal with the advent of broadcast TV in the early '50s, Gerry and I saw great potential.

We began to get calls from top wrestlers all over the country who wanted to come to Atlanta and do a shot or two on our show and then head back to their own territories. Since our show was being seen across the nation, they would go back home and be over more than they were before they traveled to Georgia to wrestle. The nationwide exposure meant more money for them when they returned home. Meanwhile, local fans in Atlanta would have the opportunity to see the best talent the wrestling world had to offer right in their own backyard, all thanks to WTBS and the emerging cable industry.

About the time Gerry and I were working our

program with Steamboat and Youngblood, we began to have problems with Jim Barnett in regards to our business philosophy, the future of our promotion, and the direction the sport was moving. We were looking at the ratings and seeing how popular Georgia Championship Wrestling had become across the country. Having access to top talent from across the nation, Gerry and I thought it would be good business to take the promotion nationwide. The one area we were looking at was the Michigan-Ohio territory.

For many years, the Detroit territory had been a hotbed of wrestling. From the '30s through the '60s, the Midwest had been a hub for professional wrestling. That was where Ed Farhat [The Sheik] controlled his version of the U.S. title until, by putting himself over and starving out his talent, he drove his promotion into bankruptcy. The ratings for our television show there were so high that we began to promote house shows.

Barnett didn't mind us booking spot shows in the

Midwest, but Gerry and I wanted to take everything a step further. We wanted to study the ratings book and promote the towns where WTBS and Georgia Championship Wrestling had their highest ratings. Jim was adamantly against it. He held to the old mindset of promoters of years past. And that's what he was; a promoter from the past with no interest in the future of wrestling. "I can't do that," Jim told Gerry and me. "All the promoters are friends of mine. I can't step on their toes by moving into their territories."

"Jim," I said, "those guys aren't your friends and you know it. They would step on your turf in a second if they thought they could make a buck."

He refused to even entertain the idea. Jim was a 1960s promoter living in 1983. Gerry and I realized that if things were going to change, it would be up to us to get the ball rolling. As Lou Thesz always reminded me, "If it's to be, its up to me." Gerry and I were determined to move in another direction, not only because we saw the

wrestling business changing, but because we had to deal with another problem we were experiencing within our promotion.

Ole Anderson was running the day-to-day business of Georgia Championship Wrestling, and when I say "running it," I mean running it into the ground. With Gerry and me working in Charlotte, we left the booking chores to Ole. Each month, he was supposed to be sending a percentage of the company profits to Gerry, me, and the other partners.

Ole knew the business well. He had been trained by Gagne in Minnesota and wrestled as Rock Rogowski in the early days of his career. In 1968, he wrestled for Gagne's AWA Omaha promotion and took its version of the heavyweight title from Bob Orton. Moving to Charlotte in 1968, he changed his name to Ole Anderson and joined his "brother" Gene Anderson as the Minnesota Wrecking Crew. They won the Atlantic Coast tag team title on five different occasions and the world

tag team title four times. Ole and Gene redefined tag team wrestling and raised it, and the fan's ire, to a new level.

On Monday, May 24, 1976, after losing a match to defending world tag team champions Mr. Wresting [Tim Woods] and Dino Bravo in the Memorial Auditorium in Greenville, South Carolina, Ole was walking back to the dressing room when a 79-year-old man attacked him and stabbed him with a hawk-billed knife. If it wasn't for the quick intervention of Woods and a few others, Ole would have died in the dressing room from the loss of blood. His assailant didn't fare much better as Ole punched him in the face and knocked him to the ground, sending him on a trip to the hospital. Doctors used more than 100 stitches to close the wound in Ole's chest, but he was back in the ring two days later.

I wrestled Ole just about everywhere — Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas. He was a good hand and a hell of a worker. I can't remember having a

bad match with him. However, good in the ring or not, he wasn't sending as much money as we thought we should be getting, all yet, at the same time, was paying himself a big salary for booking. Every time we asked him about our share, he would tell us, "I can't pay you guys because there isn't anything in the account."

Ole kept promising us things would improve if we would just give him time. We did give him time, more than once, but nothing changed. The profits seemed to be non-existent, so we had our accountants do an audit. They discovered that what we believed to be true was exactly that … true. At that point, we began looking for a way to get our money and get Ole out of the partnership.

The sequence of events that followed led to the sale of Georgia Championship Wrestling and Florida Championship Wrestling. Everything fell into place and nobody had a clue about what we were doing until the papers were signed and the deal was done.

I was in Charlotte at Crockett's office with a group of the boys doing interviews for the various television tapings. We had heard Roddy Piper had suffered a serious cut on his hand from a piece of metal under a table while announcing for the WWF, and the rumor was going around the might lose the use of that hand. That seemed to be the only subject anyone wanted to talk about that day. I spoke up. "If you're all so concerned, why don't you just call up to Connecticut and find out how Roddy is?"

Gerry and I walked into Jimmy Crockett's office and asked him if he had heard about the incident. When he said he hadn't, I called the World Wrestling Federation offices and got Roddy on line. He assured us that he was fine and would be back in the ring in no time. "Since I have you on the phone, Jack," he continued, "can you talk freely? Are you alone?"

I said "No."

"Well, then just answer yes or no," he continued. "Vince would love to have you and Gerry come up here to work. Would you guys be interested?"

"Maybe."

"Can you call me back later today?"

"Okay."

After we finished taping, Gerry and I went back to my townhouse in Charlotte and called Roddy. The upshot of our conversation was that we agreed to fly to New York the following week on our day off to discuss working for Vince.

We also had another reason for wanting to talk with Vince. Gerry and I had approached Crockett several months before about purchasing our shares of Georgia Championship Wrestling. He showed a little interest in the offer and asked us to talk to Joe Murnick and get his thoughts. He looked at our proposal and, after talking to Ole Anderson, told

us our asking price was too high and accused us of trying to rip them off. It was obvious that Jim and Elliott had no interest in buying our shares, so we felt we had done the right thing as far as the Crocketts and the Mid-Atlantic promotion was concerned. In our opinion, Gerry and I were free to seek out another buyer.

A few days later, Vince sent us two round-trip tickets and we flew to LaGuardia Airport in New York to meet with Vince in the VIP Lounge of the Delta terminal. When Vince asked if we were willing to sell, we told him we were … if the price was right.

By getting the proxy votes of Paul Jones and another partner, Ralph Freed, we had 52 percent of the company. Between the four of us, that was all we needed to gain control. Another partner, Fred Ward, held about ten percent. He had been siding with Ole. Paul Jones told us Ole had been trying to buy his shares and use that for leverage with the other shareholders so he could move us out before

we knew what he was doing. Ole's plan stalled when Fred decided not to sell.

While Ole was working his buyout angle, we kept in touch with Vince. It took a couple of months for the attorneys to put the deal together, finalize the contracts, and settle on a fair price. We actually had a meeting of the minds and an agreed-upon price by the end of the first week after our meeting with Vince, but lawyers love their details, so we had to go through the steps. What was so amazing about the whole deal was that we were able to pull the entire thing off without anyone knowing about it. In a sport where kayfabe was the rule of the day, rumors and leaks always ran rampant in the dressing room.

Vince initially wanted a two or three-month window in which he could change his mind. We told his attorneys we couldn't let that happen. It wasn't that we didn't trust Vince. We just knew the nature of the business and we didn't think we could keep our deal under wraps for that period of

time.

On the day it all was finalized, April 9, 1983, Vince flew into Atlanta with his army of attorneys and we met in our attorney's office. John Taylor and his associates represented us and began to hammer out the final details. The meeting began about nine o'clock in the morning. At nine o'clock that evening, we were still negotiating. That really wasn't a surprise. What would you expect when you're dealing with a room full of lawyers? At one point, they wanted to adjourn for the night and resume in the morning, but we wouldn't let them leave. We were too close to closing the deal to reconvene, and we were still concerned about any leaks that might occur, even at that late date. Believe me when I say we were not being paranoid. We just knew the business and how the boys worked from the inside. Everybody stayed and saw it through, and by eleven o'clock, the deal was sealed and Gerry and I walked away with a king's ransom.

Ole didn't have a clue about the goings-on. Neither did Fred Ward. We sold it right from under their noses. It happened so quickly it took them all by surprise.

When Ole found out about it, he was livid. Gerry and I had heard the rumor that Ole had put the word out to the boys that he had hired a hit-man to have us killed and, according to some sources, he allegedly said, "Those Brisco boys won't live three days." And to think some people don't take wrestling seriously!

It was one of the Road Warriors who told us about Ole's threat. We were in Cleveland, Ohio, and scheduled to meet the Road Warriors in a tag-team match. They told us Ole had offered them the princely sum of $500 if they would injure us in the match, but went on to say they had no intention of carrying out Ole's wishes. We thanked them for letting us know and for their friendship.

As far as the death threat was concerned, Gerry

and I thought it was Ole being Ole, and if he said anything of the sort, it probably was just nonsense. People say things they don't always mean in the heat of the moment. Besides, for anyone who knows Ole, he was too cheap to hire a hit-man. And if Ole did hire one, with what he would have been willing to pay, the guy probably would have been a bad shot. After three days, Gerry and I threw quite a party. Ole's name wasn't on the guest list.

After we closed the deal with Vince, we could have walked away and headed to the WWF, but we didn't. We honored our contract with our former partners and continued to wrestle in what had been the NWA. We wanted it that way and so did Vince. We had always been men of our word and threats were not going to change that.

Ole didn't stop with physical threats. He had some of his stooges call our wives, telling them about all sorts of infidelities we were supposed to be having, and made up all kinds of lies about

us. They called our business partner at the body shop and told him we were going to screw him over like we had Ole. Fortunately, we knew what we were up against and had forewarned everyone of what might be in the works, so they dismissed all of Ole's contrivances.

Ole did have one more card up his sleeve. He sued Gerry, Vince, and me. The case didn't get too far. We all were deposed and, after my deposition, Ole's lawyers advised him to drop the suit, which he did. The attorneys asked me if we had any malice or underlying reasons behind selling our shares to Vince. I told them the only reason we sold the company was because we saw it as a good financial opportunity for us and our families. That was the end of Ole's legal efforts to regain the company and it was the last time I saw him.

July 14, 1984 is the day the wrestling world refers to as Black Saturday. On that morning, Vince, Gorilla Monsoon and Chief Jay Strongbow

walked into the WTBS television studio before the regular morning taping began and took over. Vince got the wrestlers together and said, "All you boys who want to work for me can stay; all the rest of you can leave."

Vince's Georgia Championship Wrestling program didn't last very long. He had the territory set up to where he couldn't do live television taping on Saturday morning, so he sent tapes of his WWF shows to WTBS. He already was preparing to take his promotion nationwide and conquering the South was a huge first step.

Ted Turner wasn't happy with the new arrangement. He wanted live tapings every Saturday in Atlanta, which was something Vince was unable to do given his other commitments. Ted laid down the gauntlet. Either Vince does live tapings, or he's off the air. Vince may have owned the promotion, but Ted owned the air-time.

Vince didn't really have much of a choice. Being unable to meet Turner's demands, he sold Georgia Championship Wrestling and Florida Championship Wrestling to Jim Crockett. Unfortunately (for Crockett), it didn't take Crockett long to lose everything. Jim, of course, had inherited the business from his father, and he had a huge roster of top guys in his territory. The territory was still as hot as it had ever been, but Jim wasn't paying attention to business … or if he was, he didn't care. Jim thought he was the man. He believed he was the brains behind his promotional success. With the boys he had — Ric Flair, Ricky Steamboat, Wahoo McDaniel, Blackjack Mulligan, the Masked Superstar — and George Scott doing the booking, it was easy for him to look good. The facts were, they made Crockett look like a genius. He thought it was because of his business savvy, but in reality, it was all George Scott.

When George Scott moved on and he was left on his own, Crockett soon learned how inept he was

when it came to running a wrestling business. Georgia Championship Wrestling ate him alive. He lost most, or all, of what he had earned during the good years, but he didn't go broke on his own. He had considerable help in the person of Virgil Runnels, better known to the wrestling world as Dusty Rhodes, the "American Dream."

I always liked Dusty. His "American Dream," son-of-a-plumber, working-class-champion character, was successful everywhere he wrestled. He held the world heavyweight championship three times in the late '70s and early '80s. Of course, by the time he won the title for the third time, the "NWA world heavyweight title" was little more than a company title.

I first met Dusty when I was wrestling in Oklahoma. We were on the same card in Springfield, Missouri. He told me he was leaving to go to Detroit to team up with Dick Murdoch as the Texas Outlaws, and they would be the top heel

team in the territory.

I didn't hear from Dusty again for almost five years, until one day in August 1970 when he called while I was working in Florida. He asked me if I thought Eddie could use him and Murdoch. He said they had to get out of Detroit because they were starving. Big surprise … Farhat starving his boys. I told Dusty I would check with Louie Tillet, who was doing the booking for Eddie. Louie and I talked with Eddie and they told me to bring them in.

Dusty and Murdoch stayed in Florida through the end of the year, at which time they went to Australia for three months. During the next three years, Dusty spent his time in Oklahoma, Minneapolis, and Japan, and returned to Florida in August 1973.

Shortly after I won the world title, Dusty began to call himself the "American Dream." I had just finished a workout on television with Dennis

Stamp and was interviewing with Gordon Solie. During the interview, Dusty walked out with Dick Slater. Rhodes was wearing a tuxedo with tails and a top hat. A 300-pound man wearing tails was a sight to behold. They walked up to the announcer's desk and Dusty began to run his mouth. "You should be ashamed for wrestling a rookie like Stamp, but you did pretty well ... for a squaw. If you were any kind of a man, let alone the world heavyweight champion, you would be in the ring with a real man, like my protégé, Dick Slater."

I challenged Rhodes to back up his talk in the ring, left the table, and got into the ring. The fans loved it. Instead of Rhodes entering the ring, he sent Slater, who was in his wrestling gear. Since I had just finished an amateur rules workout, I took the down position and Slater took the top. Dick tried to ride me, but I carried him a bit and then reversed him. I rode him out with Dick trying to reverse me. I caught him in a three-quarter nelson and, as I was pinning him, Dusty came in and

dropped his "bionic" elbow across the back of my neck … several times. He then jumped on me for the pin and Slater counted me out.

While they were carrying me out of the ring, Rhodes returned to Gordon's desk and proclaimed that since he had just pinned the world champion, he now was the new champion. "I'm a plumber's son from Texas, now the world heavyweight champion, truly an "American Dream."

He always was fun to work with, whether as a heel or a babyface. I had one especially unique experience while defending the title against Dusty in Miami. It was the first time I was ever booed in Florida. At one point in the match, I had Dusty in the corner and dropped him with an elbow. As he slumped to the mat, I nailed him with a knee-lift. The fans in the Miami Beach Auditorium started booing and cat-calling me. Here I was the world champion — their world champion — in my home territory, and I was being booed. That was an example of how desperately the fans wanted to

see the world title change hands. They wanted to be there when history was made. They had cheered me when I was introduced in the ring, but not now. They wanted to see the belt change hands.

As good a worker as Dusty was in the ring, those talents didn't transfer to the booking office. He always was putting himself over. He was the star in every angle and killed town after town by defeating Flair for the world title, only to have the referee's decision overturned days later. Until the following week's television show aired, as far as the fans knew, they had a new world champion. He also was good at spending money — Crockett's money. He was living as large as his ample girth, and it all was on someone else's dime.

After gaining the coveted spot on WTBS from Vince, a slot he had dreamed of for years, and buying out Bill Watt's Universal Wrestling Federation, Dusty convinced Jim to move his

wrestling operations from Charlotte to Dallas. Crockett now was promoting in Florida, the Mid-Atlantic, Toronto, and parts of Texas and Oklahoma. The expansion was expensive and, with Dusty in charge of the checkbook, dark days loomed ahead. It was the general opinion that it wasn't unusual for Dusty to spend $75,000 to make $50,000. It cost Crockett a lot of money to expand. They had a private jet and spent money like there was an endless stream in which dollars flowed into the back of their office. Limousines, high-priced hotels; nothing was too good for Dusty and the boys.

The final blow — or, at least one close to it — came when Vince decided to go head-to-head with Starrcade on Thanksgiving night in 1987. With the tremendous success of WrestleMania, Vince created a second pay-for-view event called Survivor Series. He offered it to cable companies for airing on the same night as Starrcade. There was only one catch. The cable companies had to make a choice. They could run his event, or they

could run Crockett's, but if they wanted Survivor Series, they could not offer their customers Starrcade. With the success of the WrestleMania pay-for-views, all but a very few cable companies chose Starrcade over McMahon's show. It was a huge blow to the wrestling business and the ego of Jim Crockett.

A few months later, Vince moved in for the kill. Another of Crockett's pay-per-view events, The Bunkhouse Stampede, was scheduled to air on January 24, 1988. Once again, Vince went head-to-head with Crockett, but this time, he offered a pay-for-view caliber show featuring a battle royal "at no charge to viewers" on the USA network. It was dubbed the Royal Rumble, and once again, pulled viewers away from Crockett's event.

With a huge loss of revenue and Vince outmaneuvering him at every turn, Crockett had little choice. He sold his company to Ted Turner by the end of 1988. Turner waged war with the WWF for more than a decade, but in the end, Vince

owned everything. It’s little wonder why Joe Scarpa’s nickname for McMahon was "The Emperor."

Chapter 34
First Flight Headed South

After Gerry and I sold our stock in the wrestling companies to Vince, we finished our wrestling obligations with Jim Crockett. I took a few months off to think about how much longer I wanted to continue to wrestle. I wasn't quite ready to give it all up at that time, but I had no doubt the day was getting closer.

George Scott, who by that time was booking for the WWF, called and asked if I would be interested in wrestling for the WWF as a tag team with Gerry. I liked Vince and, based on our dealings with him, I liked the way he did business. I also knew the type of programs George had always done, so after talking to Gerry about it, we headed up to Stamford. I thought I would give

it six months and then re-evaluate my future plans.

We were put into a program wrestling Dick Murdoch and Adrian Adonis. I had known Murdoch for years and had great matches with him in Florida and Texas. Dick was a second-generation wrestler. His father, Frankie Hill Murdoch, had been a big draw in Texas, especially around Amarillo. Dick actually got his start in the business by making trips with his dad and watching him wrestle. Dick was as tough outside the ring as he was inside it, but if he was your friend, he was your friend for life. He passed away from a heart attack in 1996.

Adrian Adonis, whose real name was Keith Franke, had wrestled for most of the major promotions. Adonis held the AWA world tag team title with Jesse Ventura as the "East West Connection," won Paul Boesch's tournament in Houston to crown a single world heavyweight champion (none of the other champions, of course, were competing in the tournament), and the WWF

world tag team title with Murdoch. A car accident in Newfoundland took his life when he was traveling from a match on July 4, 1988.

Gerry and I were booked to work our program with Murdoch and Adonis in order to get established and to get over in the WWF, after which time we would move into a program with the current tag champions, Mike Rotundo and Barry Windham, who took the title from Murdoch and Adonis midway through our run with them. At least, that was the plan.

Our initial matches went well, but it wasn't long until the locker-room politics began to surface. On January 5, 1985, while we were getting ready for our match in the Boston Garden against Murdoch and Adonis, Jay Strongbow came into the dressing room and gave us our paychecks. We opened them and found we had been shorted on our payoff.

Surprise, surprise! Jim Barnett was now working with Vince and was in charge of the

payoffs. Gerry and I had run Jim out of Georgia Championship Wrestling for screwing around with the boys' payoff, and now he was in Connecticut doing the same thing. I couldn't believe it. It was a new era, a new promotion, a new town … and the same old Jim Barnett. He was up to his old tricks.

Murdoch and Adonis had each been paid a thousand dollars more than Gerry and I. I didn't say a word. I just started taking off my boots. When Chief asked me what I was doing, I told him I was getting dressed and going home. Joe knew me well enough from all of our years together to know I was serious. He said, "Jack, don't leave. I'll call Barnett."

The Boston Garden was sold out and we were being featured in one of the main events, so Barnett had a lot of incentive to keep us happy. Barnett told Joe, "Don't let them leave. I'll make it up to them. I will give them the rest of their money." After all those years on the road and

putting up with the crap, I was ready to leave. Our program with Murdoch and Adonis was almost over, anyway.

The next night, January 6, Gerry and I worked with Murdoch and Adonis in East Rutherford, New Jersey. We had some time off before our next booking, so I flew to Tampa for a few days rest. When we landed, the temperature was 80 degrees and the sun was shining. In the days that followed, the more I was home, the harder it was for me to get back on the plane and head back up north.

One week, we were booked in Erie, Pennsylvania, so we flew into Pittsburgh. When our plane touched down, the temperature was 20 degrees and it was snowing like hell. It was snowing so hard we could barely see the road. We had to drive 130 miles in those conditions. It was the first time I had been to Erie, and as we drove through downtown, all we could see was snow. We drove by what I figured was the city

park, but I didn't know for sure because the snow was piled three to four stories high. It was just a mountain of snow and ice. I had just been in Florida that morning, where the weather had been beautiful. I kept thinking, "This is crazy. Do people actually live like this?"

Walking into the auditorium was no better. It was old, run down, and smelled of mildew. It was awful. When Gerry and I walked through the door, the police sitting around yelled out, "Hey, hey! The Brisco brothers."

I looked over at them and said, "Whoever named this town Erie sure knew what they were talking about."

Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, they did. Murdoch refused to put us over. We had been going back and forth, putting each other over, and never had a problem. Now Scarpa walks into the dressing room and says Dick didn't want to do the job. "What?" I asked. "We're here in the

middle of this lousy weather and he wants to argue about who's getting over? I'll tell you what. I'll put him over. What do I care? This is nuts."

The next night, Gerry and I put over Murdoch and Don Muraco in Pittsburgh. The following night in Landover, Maryland, we did a job for Roddy Piper and Bob Orton Jr. That would be the last match I had in the WWF. From there, we flew into Newark, where Don Muraco was waiting to pick us up. I had known Don for years and had worked with him in both Florida and Charlotte. His beach-bum character was not a gimmick. He really was born in Hawaii and he loved the surf. If the surf was up, he would take off and fly home, regardless of whether or not he was involved in a top program. He would call Eddie Graham and say, "Don't book me for the next two weeks. I'm going surfing." It used to drive Eddie crazy, but that was Don.

When Don picked us up that afternoon, it had been snowing so hard that all the cars were

covered with snow. Don hadn't been in the terminal for more than 20 minutes, but when we walked out to the parking lot, we couldn't find his car. In that short space of time, his car had been completely covered with snow. There we were, three big-time wrestlers, walking around the parking lot looking for Don's car. He didn't have a clue as to where he had parked, so we wandered around like we were in a scene from one of the Three Stooges films.

The wind was blowing, the snow was falling, and my face was so cold that my lips were frozen. In fact, my entire face felt like a swarm of angry bees were stinging it. As we walked around the parking lot, I kept hearing the planes taking off, and all I could think was that they were all headed south. I turned around to face Gerry. It was almost comical, if it wasn't for the fact that I couldn't feel my face or my hands. I told him, "Gerry, you see all those planes heading south? The next one leaving — I'm going to be on it."

I walked back into the Newark Airport, looked at the monitors, and bought a ticket for the next plane headed south. The plane was flying to Atlanta, so I bought a ticket and flew to Atlanta, and from there, I made connections to Tampa. I went home and thawed out. I have never been back.

Both the fans and my friends must have thought it strange that I ended my career so abruptly, but I had been thinking about it for a long time. The snow was simply the catalyst that put what I had been thinking for years into motion. I don't regret how it happened at all. I didn't have a farewell tour or even a "retirement" match. I simply walked away on my own terms when I thought the time was right.

Too many wrestlers stay in the business way past the time when they should retire. Like any other athlete, you always think you have one more match, or one more game, in you, so you compete until your body tells you it's time to quit, or worse, an injury forces you out. I was fortunate. I had other

interests. I had a successful business waiting for me, and I was able to walk away both mentally and physically. It would be hard to ask for any more than that.

When I returned home, I did something I never thought I would be able to do. I owned a gold, presidential model Rolex watch that I had worn for years. I lived by that watch for 22 years. Plane schedules, check-in times, match times, television tapings — all by the watch. I was constantly living by somebody else's timetable. When I got back home, I took off the watch and haven't worn one since. My life had always revolved around that watch, but not any longer.

I'm glad I had the opportunity to end my career with Vince. Working for him was easy. He ran, and still runs, a first-class operation. He paid for nearly everything. Plane tickets and rental cars were all taken care of by the company and the payoffs were good. Without a doubt, Vince is a class act. It was a pleasure to work for him and,

for me, it was the perfect swan song. If it hadn't been for the weather, who knows … I may have stayed longer. If Vince had promoted in the South, I may still be working today.

Chapter 35
Dr. Patell's Miracle Man

Since leaving the ring, I have been able to relax at home with Jan, help run the Brisco Brothers Body Shop, and travel a bit back and forth to Oklahoma to visit with my children and six grandchildren. Jan and I became avid fans of another sport; NASCAR. I guess it comes with the territory of working with cars. We go to Talladega, Daytona, and a number of other tracks throughout the year.

Several years ago, I got to meet and spend time with one of my NASCAR heroes, Dale Earnhardt. The body shop won a contest for being the largest user of GM parts, so I got to pick up Dale at the airport and drive him around. It was quite a thrill. When he was killed in Daytona on

February 18, 2001, Jan and I were devastated, as were countless other racing fans. A great driver and a great athlete, he personified NASCAR to so many of us. He left a hole that will never be filled.

In the early pages of this book, I said wrestling saved my life. It did. Not only in the metaphoric sense, that being it brought me and my family out of the poverty we were living in during my childhood and the years that followed, but it literally saved my life.

In June 1999, I arrived home late in the afternoon, shortly after the workmen were re-asphalting my driveway. They had left a few pieces of the asphalt beside the carport, so I decided to toss them in my pickup truck and haul them away. There was one fairly large piece that I had to swing back and forth three times to get the momentum I needed to get it into the truck. On the third swing, the piece broke apart and caused me to fall into the truck. I wrenched my back and was in pain for the next few days, and as the days went

by, the pain got worse. I couldn't sleep and it grew to a point where I could hardly walk. I went to a chiropractor, but that didn't help. The pain just got worse.

On the Friday before Father's Day, I came home from the body shop, went inside the house, and sat down to relax. I only sat there for a few minutes, but I couldn't stand up. I was paralyzed from the waist down. Jan called Gerry and asked him to come over. Gerry lives just down the street from us and he was there in a matter of minutes. Gerry and Jan lifted me into the car and rushed me to the hospital.

The doctors wasted no time running a battery of tests and found a growth had wrapped itself around my spine. The attending physician, Dr. Himanshu Patell, told us we had to make one of two choices, and we had to make it quickly. If they didn't remove the growth, it most certainly would take my life, and there was a good possibility I might not even live through the night. The other choice was

to let Dr. Patell operate and remove the growth. He told us the surgery wouldn't be easy, and even if I survived, I may not walk again. It was a Hobson's choice to me; that is, there was no choice at all. We told Dr. Patell to operate. We would put our trust in his hands and would hope and pray for the best.

After cutting me open the next morning during the surgery, Dr. Patell discovered the growth had attached itself to my spine. He had to cut into it to remove it. When he did, a bacterial infection spread through my bloodstream. My head and arms swelled to nearly three times their normal size and I was immediately put on life support, where I remained for six days. My recovery was very slow and they kept me in intensive care for the next 23 days. To keep my lungs from filling with fluid, they had to be drained constantly. Seventeen specialists were brought in to monitor my case, which was, as I later found out, one of only two they had ever encountered. Dr. Patell saved my life.

For the next six months, I slowly regained my strength and had to spend a great deal of time in a wheelchair. I eventually graduated to a walker, while frequently relying on oxygen when breathing became difficult. Jan and I joined the YMCA to take advantage of its water therapy program. For the next eight months, I spent about as much time in the pool as I did on land. In the pool, I was able to do exercises like bending and twisting that I couldn't even begin to do out of the water.

Every day for a year, I was in the Y and working out in the pool. After awhile, I began to work out on the weight machines, beginning with light weights and gradually increasing them. After a year, the trainers at the Y told me I was as strong as I was going to get. I didn't listen to them. I knew what I was capable of doing and I knew I hadn't reached my full potential. I had faced physical challenges all my life. I had wrestled some of the toughest men who had ever lived. The trainers were not going to tell me that was all I would ever be able to do.

In a matter of months, I tripled what I was lifting and began to walk without the use of the walker. Dr. Patell calls me his "miracle man." "The only reason Jack is here," he told everyone, "is because he wants to be."

He was right. I wasn't ready to go. The main reason was, I didn't want to leave Jan. We have been together for 28 years and that was not nearly enough. Without a doubt, what gave me the resolve and the strength to fight was that I was a wrestler. All the training, both physical and mental, came from wrestling. Without wrestling, there is no question that I would not be alive today. Dr. Patell heartily concurs that it was not only my will, but my heart that helped me survive.

Wrestling has changed a lot since I had my first professional match, which it has since the early days of the sport. As the years went by, it changed to reflect the times and to keep things fresh for the fans.

When I was wrestling, the emphasis was more on the athletic aspect of the sport. Many of the wrestlers came through the amateur ranks and worked matches that lasted anywhere from fifteen minutes to more than an hour. Night after night, Gerry, the Funks, Harley, and so many others, would grind out long matches.

By the time Dusty Rhodes became so popular, nobody seemed to work out as much and there were more bleached-blond wrestlers. More elbows were thrown than single leg takedowns. Actual "wrestling" became the exception, rather than the rule.

When Hulk Hogan came along, the entire industry changed and brought with it a new legion of fans. Marketing made wrestling a mainstream form of entertainment. There wasn't much wrestling going on during the matches, but people loved the theatrics and the larger-than-life characters. During Hogan's reign, the other top stars were all almost as well-known as he was,

and wrestling took on a whole new look. The wrestlers got bigger and more muscular, and monsters like Vader, Yokozuna, and other giants ruled the roost.

After a few years, that ran its course and wrestling was reinvented once again. It went back to the basics with the emergence of Steve Austin, Owen Hart, Bret Hart, Shawn Michaels. The return of Bob Backlund transported the fans back to the days of scientific matches and hour-long broadways.

Somewhere along the line, an interesting twist occurred. The fans not only cheered the heroes, but they also began to cheer for the heels. Before too long, the lines became blurred to a point where there was no clear line between the good guys and the bad guys. They were just "wrestlers," each with their own following and fans cheering them on, regardless of their in-the-ring tactics.

Many wrestlers who competed and worked in the

"pre-Vince era" don't think much about what wrestling has become. Thirty years ago, I would have agreed with them, but it is a different day and a different time. Society has changed. Technology has shrunk the world. As such, I don't necessarily think of professional wrestling as being either better or worse than when I was wrestling. It's just different. Wrestling still is a great sport. The fact that it can keep reinventing itself attests to that.

There are things in wrestling today that are much better than years ago. The money, the worldwide exposure, the training, and the science of nutrition are all far ahead of anything most of us ever dreamed of. And the athletes of today are unbelievable. Triple H, The Undertaker, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, The Rock, Kurt Angle, and Brock Lesnar. I enjoy their work tremendously. They have followed in the trends of wrestling, just as we followed the trends that took place during the days of Lou Thesz and Danny Hodge. I am proud of how they carry the mantle. They all make me wish, at times, that I

was still back in the ring. I would love to have worked with any of them. What matches we could have had together.

I first met Dwayne Johnson — or the Rock, as most know him — on July 27, 1974 when I made a trip to San Francisco to defend the title. His father, Rocky Johnson, was in the Cow Palace that night. I had always heard great things about Rocky and his work in the ring. He was known for his high-flying style and for his version of the "Ali shuffle," which he did before launching his famous dropkick. Like Roddy Piper, Rocky's career began in the boxing ring. While working out in the Trinity Community Center, Rocky came in contact with some of the greatest wrestlers of the day and, in 1966, made his debut in the ring. Since then, he earned main event status and has traveled the world. He was a top professional in the ring. More importantly, he was a perfect gentleman outside of it, always treating everyone he met with kindness and respect.

Our paths had never crossed before that. He came up to me in the dressing room and asked if I knew of any territories he might look into. "I'm dying here, Jack. Can you help me?" he asked.

I called Eddie in Florida and he made Rocky an offer. Two months later, Eddie got Rocky into Atlanta, and by January the following year, he was working on top in Florida.

When Rocky arrived in Tampa, he had his wife and young son with him. I first remember meeting Dwayne — Dewey as we called him — when he was ten years old. He was just a skinny little kid with a big afro. The one thing I remember about Dewey was that he was a lot of fun and always seemed to be happy. Little did we know at the time that he would become a great athlete and a world champion with the WWE. Today, he has transcended the sport. Whether he is in the ring, portraying an action character in a blockbuster film, or hosting Saturday Night Live, he has gotten over like few before him. If you have ever seen

him being interviewed, you need to realize that the genial, engaging young man you see on camera is the person he is in real life. Rocky and his wife have raised a great son. I am happy to call Rocky and his family my friends.

Two other athletes who have brought amateur wrestling back into the limelight in the professional ring are Kurt Angle and Brock Lesnar. Both are phenomenal athletes and national collegiate wrestling champions. Kurt, of course, was a world and Olympic freestyle champion and won the Olympic gold medal while suffering from a neck injury. I suppose my background and the path I took to the world title leads me to gravitate towards Kurt and Brock. Both were amateur champions, are now world champions, and they did it in less time than I did. However, they paid their dues in a way very few have, and have earned their success. They have done us proud.

Injuries seem to be happening more frequently to the boys today than in the past. We certainly had

our share of injuries, but nothing like today. I believe it is caused by a number of factors. One could be avoided fairly easily. Gerry, who continues to work for World Wrestling Entertainment, emphasizes at every opportunity the importance of warming up properly. We had the good fortune of coming from amateur wrestling, and one of the first things we learned was how to warm up. Stretching the muscles and working up a sweat before entering the ring was as important as what went on after we entered it. With the long matches every night, it was imperative that we were loose before we crawled through the ropes. Years ago, amateur background or not, everybody prepared themselves before going out to wrestle. Many of the boys today have worked hard to develop their bodies, so they need to stretch all the more to avoid muscle and tendon injuries.

The styles of wrestling also have quite a bit to do with the number of injuries today. Years ago, most of us were mat wrestlers. We stayed close to the ground as much as possible. That allowed for

fewer injuries. Look at the longevity of the careers of past champions compared to many of those today. Why do you think Lou Thesz was able to wrestle in seven different decades?

Once you start working above your head, doing high-flying, risky moves, the chances of injury dramatically increases. The shows are much more spectacular today than they were when I was wrestling, but then again, so are the injuries. Again, this is not a criticism on the sport today, but an observation by someone who has been there. I actually marvel at the athletic ability of the athletes in the ring today, and I wish them nothing but long, successful careers.

One man has almost single-handedly changed the landscape of professional wrestling — more than any promoter in history, and probably more than all the promoters who came before put together — is Vince McMahon. I never cease to be amazed at what he has done to raise wrestling to the level of other major sports. From major television

productions, pay-for-views, opening of the stock market, and a major presence in both the Democratic and Republican conventions, Vince has raised the level of the athletes to a consistently-new level.

The road to business success is seldom easy, and that has certainly been the case at times for Vince and World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. Throughout the criticism, legal battles, and media attacks, Vince kept true to the vision and mission of his company, and has created a multi-billion dollar empire in the process.

Always an innovator, Vince declared that professional wrestling was not a competition as such, but sports entertainment. His announcement was not an apology, nor was it meant to lessen what the wrestlers do in the ring; it was a business decision that sent the sport to new heights. It took wrestling out from under the auspice of state athletic commissions and gave him more freedom to expand the WWE brand of wrestling. I know

many veteran wrestlers who were aghast at the notion of McMahan breaking kayfabe and spilling out secrets of the industry.

Since then, the ire of some of the boys has settled down. If anything, it served to erect a platform for wrestlers to be viewed as authentic athletes by the world at large. There was little doubt, if any, by athletes from other professional sports that wrestlers were some of the most well conditioned athletes anywhere. If they had come to know any wrestler, they knew the stress we put our bodies through on a daily basis would test any of them, and most of them knew they would fall short.

There are now more opportunities for wrestlers to be part of the mainstream media, where they can extol their athleticism and promote the sport. Wrestling became the most-watched program on television, mostly thanks to Vince McMahon, his vision, and determination. He has added a new dimension to the business and took the business aspect of our sport from the back

rooms and small offices to the corporate level. Vince's company rivals that of any multinational corporation. Like him or not, you have to give him credit. How many other professional wrestling promoters have addressed the Harvard Business School?

Today, Jan and I own a wonderful home on four acres located on Lake Crescent in Odessa, Florida, just outside of Tampa. Twenty-five years ago, we had been living in an apartment and had been looking for a home for more than a year when we found a one-bedroom fishing cabin that was in need of repair and a loving owner. When we saw it, we both knew we were home. We remodeled it and couldn't be happier.

We have added a guest house so my children and their children have a place to stay when they visit. We are surrounded by 55 acres of wildlife and bird sanctuary, with only ten homes on the entire lake. Down the street are horse farms and a gated community. It is a beautiful area and I can't

imagine being happier. Most of our family lives close by and our dog, Sugar, and our cat, Boomer, have the run of the place. It is great to finally be home.

Throughout his post-ring career, former world heavyweight boxing champion Gene Tunney ran several companies and served on the board of directors of numerous corporations, including the National Wrestling Alliance. His success in the ring led to his success and fortune in his endeavors out of it. But no matter where his life took him, no matter what questions he was asked, he always proudly named his profession as a prize-fighter.

I understand why he did that. The ring gets into your blood, and once it's there, it courses through your veins and lodges itself deep into your heart. That is why I am happily reminded, with every beat of my heart, that I am, and always will be, a wrestler.

Epilogue by Bill Murdock

I first heard of Jack's death just a few hours after he passed away. It was early afternoon on Monday, February 1, 2010, and I was just arriving back to my office after attending a memorial service for my former high-school English teacher, Mary Liverette. Mrs. Liverette had passed away the week before and family, friends, colleagues, and students came together to say our last goodbyes and to remember this wonderful lady.

I was pulling into the driveway when my phone rang. Seeing it was Gerry Brisco, I answered with my usual, "Mr. Brisco." But this call was different; Gerry didn't greet me with his usual "Mr. Murdock," and some friendly remark about my living in the mountains of western North Carolina and cell phone reception.

"Bill. We lost Jack this morning."

"Oh, my God! What happened?"

"It was a heart attack. He's gone."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"We are just trying to get things together. I'll call you later. I just wanted you to know right away. Please don't say anything yet. We have a lot of personal and business calls to make today, before we let everyone else know."

I told him I certainly wouldn't say anything until I heard from him, and if he would, please give my condolences and love to Jan, Bill, and the rest of his family.

When someone of Jack's renown passes away, it doesn't take long for the world to capture the news. And I am sure it is all the more for world champions and those who have captured the imagination, respect, and enthralled so many for so

long.

In the time it took me to finish my conversation with Gerry, walk into the office, and get to my computer, the Internet was full of the news of Jack's passing. This wasn't just regional news. The nation and the world knew in short order that one of the greatest wrestlers, world champions, and athletes of all time was no longer with us.

That evening, WWE's Monday Night Raw began its broadcast with a tribute and memorial to Jack; a fitting honor, not just to a fallen champion, but to the great man he was. A man who left a legacy like few others had or ever will.

A few days later, Gerry called and told me he and Jan would like me to take part in giving Jack's eulogy. I was more than a little surprised, and I was sure there were many other friends and family members who knew Jack better and deserved to be part of the service more than I did.

Gerry said it would be a great honor for all the family if I would agree to do so. He told me their long-time friends, Jim Ross and Monsignor Lawrence Higgins, would also be giving the eulogy.

I was humbled all the more to be sharing such an honor with someone as important and famous as Jim Ross, and to share a space at the altar with Monsignor Higgins (being Catholic, being up at the altar is always a special and moving experience, and being there for Jack, Jan, Gerry, and their family made it all the more so).

I told Gerry the honor was entirely mine and went to work on the most important thing I would ever write. Memorializing my boyhood hero — the reason I ever stepped on the mat or followed the sport — was more of a burden than I first thought. Not that it was a burden in a negative sense. If anything, I considered it as President Kennedy one said: "a glorious burden." I just believed I was ill-equipped for such an important

task. A part of me — and a good part, I think — was still that kid in the balcony at the Asheville Civic Center, watching Jack defend his belt against Wahoo, or in his post-world-heavyweight-title years defending his Mid-Atlantic title, or with Gerry fending off all challengers for their NWA world tag team title. So much of me was still the young man who combed the magazine racks at Aiken's Supermarket, Skyland Drugs, and Chilton's Newstand, searching for the latest edition of Wrestling Revue, Inside Wrestling, or The Wrestler … eagerly putting down my 50 or 60 cents for the latest issues.

I spent the next week or so writing and rewriting what I was going to say in front of his families and friends. How I was going to remember my friend, my hero, and one who I believed, and always will believe, I owe so much.

Jack's memorial Mass was held on Thursday, February 11, 2010 at St. Lawrence Catholic Church in Tampa. It was on the same day when,

41 years earlier, he won his first major championship by defeating Larry Hamilton, the "Missouri Mauler," for the NWA southern heavyweight title in Fort Homer Hesterly Armory in the same city. Jack had once told me that was the most important match in his career. The main event that evening had Dory Funk Jr. winning the NWA world heavyweight title from reigning champion, Gene Kiniski.

I arrived in Tampa on the Wednesday morning before the service and stayed with another idol from my boyhood, George Scott, and his wonderful wife Jean. We had lunch together (along with Bonnie Steamboat) at Red Lobster and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening catching up and hearing more great stories about Jack from one of the greatest wrestlers, promoters, bookers, minds, and friends the sport of wrestling has ever known.

The next day we arrived at St. Lawrence about an hour and a half before the Mass was to begin. We were far from the first to arrive as there was

already a large crowd making their way into the church, as well as two television news teams and other media reporters from newspapers, radio, and internet there to cover what was a seminal event, not only for the Tampa community, but also for the entire sports world.

By the time the Mass started, the church was packed, with hundreds standing around the inside and outside of St. Lawrence. So many of Jack's colleagues from the ring were there to pay the respect they have always had for him. Dory and Terry Funk, Dusty Rhodes, Mike Graham, Adam Copeland (Edge), and, of course, George Scott, Jim Ross, and a great number of others, had all gathered to bid goodbye to their friend.

The service and the inside of the church were simple, as befitting the champion and man Jack had been. There were flowers around the altar or throughout the church. No portraits of Jack, no title belts, or table depicting the events of Jack's life were on display. There were no memorial videos

being played in the vestibule, or anything else for that matter, which might lead one to believe the man being laid to rest that day was someone that millions across the world knew for decades for all he accomplished. The greatest athlete Oklahoma (or the nation) had ever produced, second only to Jim Thorpe, more than a few news outlets reported. But then again, there didn't need to be. Jack, even that day, was above all of that.

Even the Mass card given to those in attendance was one that would be expected of a champion.

The cover simply read "In Remembrance," with a sketch of a number of trees by a stream and a few clouds and birds could be seen in the sky. When you opened the card, on the left hand side was the Lord's Prayer, and the right modestly read:

In Loving Memory
Jack Brisco

Date and Place of Birth

September 21, 1941
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Date and Place of Death
February 1, 2010
Land O Lakes, Florida

Memorial Mass
1 PM
Thursday

February 11, 2010
St. Lawrence Catholic Church

Father began the Mass and articulately spoke of Jack. He talked about the man Jack had been and what he meant to the community.

Jim Ross spoke next and told of how he and his father followed Jack's career, and how it made him and everyone from Oklahoma proud as that young man from Blackwell set the NCAA on fire. He spoke of their long-standing friendship and what that meant to him.

I stood at the lectern last, introduced myself, and found myself again wondering if what I was about to say was fitting for my friend and his family who had grown to mean so much to me. I wasn't concerned about the crowd. I wanted to do well for Jan, Gerry and Barbara, Bill, Gene, Shirley, Sharon, Jack's children, grandchildren, and his nieces and nephews. I wanted to do well for Jack. It was a token payment for a large debt. Below is what I said:

Thank you Jan, Gerry, and all of you who are Jack's family and friends, for allowing me this great honor in being here today. I know there is nothing I can say here today that hasn't already been said this past week, in countless newspapers, news reports, and internet sites, which only speaks to the great respect so many had for Jack. Nor are there any feelings I can convey that have not been felt by so many here.

I first heard about Jack when I moved to North

Carolina with my grandparents. I met a new group of friends who were wrestling fans, and began watching it on TV, and spent every dime of our allowances on wrestling magazines and tickets to the matches at the Asheville City Auditorium.

I also became interested in the history of wrestling, and that's where I first met Jack. Wrestling Revue hailed a young wrestler from Oklahoma as the "New Gotch." I knew Frank Gotch was considered the greatest wrestler of all time. Now a "new Gotch" was being heralded, and he was Jack Brisco.

It was because of Jack that I first began wrestling in high school and that had as much impact on my life as anything has before or since.

I first saw Jack on TV when he came to Mid-Atlantic Wrestling shortly after George Scott took over the booking for Crockett Promotions and had resurrected a failing territory, building it around Gerry, defeating Bill White in less than a minute

with the figure-four leglock. I followed Jack's career, as thousands of other fans, through magazines and clips they would show from Florida.

I remember vividly the Sunday morning on the way to Mass, picking up the Sunday papers for my grandparents, along with the latest copy of Inside Wrestling with the cover reading "Jack Brisco Wins World Title."

But I really began to know Jack in 2001 when I was asked by Mike Chapman to interview him and write a story on him and his days at Oklahoma State for WIN Magazine. In talking with Jack in his office, I began to learn about who Jack really was. Not the NCAA and world champion, but who he was off the mat and outside of the ring.

And it was not just in the interview, but what I noticed in his office. There was nothing displayed there that would draw a hint at who he was. No pictures from his days in the ring or at Oklahoma

State. No one walking in would know they were standing in the presence of one of the greatest athletes and wrestlers this country has ever produced. What I saw was NASCAR memorabilia and remnants of his passion for Duke basketball.

In doing the article, Jack kept bringing up the fact that he thought no one would be interested in reading about him, especially after all this time away from the sport. He was wrong.

We spent a great deal of the time talking about Duke basketball and I kept thinking, "This is Jack Brisco sitting here." And he kept quizzing me about Coach K and the Blue Devils.

We started working on his book shortly after the article came out with Jack always asking, "Who is going to want to read this?"

All I could reply was, "You'd be surprised ..."

It is sometimes difficult trying to put the idols of your youth into perspective to who they really are

as a real person. You have in your mind who the person is, or who you hoped they would be, hoping not to be disappointed if you ever met them. Jack was everything I'd thought he would be. I don't think I have ever met anyone who was as comfortable and genuinely grateful for his life and all that was in it. It was easy to see quickly how much Jack loved his family and friends.

During such a hardscrabble time growing up, Jack made sure that no matter what, he was there for them. Even while he was in high school, he made sure he was there to help his mother out as she was working so hard to provide for her family. Every morning before school, he made breakfast for Gerry, made sure he ate and had his homework done. And from what I understand, Jack didn't let Gerry slide in anything. I believe that no matter how loud and long Gerry would protest about how tired he was, Jack would tell him, "You can cry all night if you want, but you are not going to bed until you finish your homework."

But Jack was always there to support Gerry. When their mother Iona would quiz Gerry on his spelling words, Jack would position himself outside the open window and whisper the spelling to him to help him out. They were a tag team long before they stepped in the ring.

Writing the book was difficult at first. Jack was humble to a fault. He wouldn't elaborate on anything. When I was writing about him winning the world heavyweight title in Houston, all he said at first was that it was a good match and he liked working with Harley. "Jack. I need more than that."

"Well, it was on a Friday night."

Finishing the book was just as difficult, but for a different reason ... I didn't want it to end. I was like a kid in a candy store, talking to one of my heroes each week and hearing the stories of the road. I just didn't want it to end.

Jack had a quiet self-confidence that manifested itself in an unusual way. Where so many in Jack's position would have had their head turned by success, Jack was kind. Where so many would be self promoting and looking for an angle to get ahead, Jack went far out of his way to help and promote others. And where so many may have found themselves jealous of others as their careers climbed, Jack was as happy for their success as he was his own. It was as if Rudyard Kipling had Jack in mind when he wrote his poem "If."

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,

Or walk with kings - nor lose the common touch;

That was Jack.

There are few champions that resonate throughout the world of sports as Jack did. A very private man in the public spotlight, Jack set a standard for every champion on the mat or in the ring that was to follow. But he did it quietly and on his own

terms. Terms just not good for him, but what he knew would be good for others, as well.

When he knew it was time for him to go, time for him to drop the title, Jack was the one who decided that. It wasn't the NWA. It was Jack. They weren't moving him down the card when he relinquished the title. He was still the main event. But it was time to go. The same when he took the flight home in 1984 from a frozen Newark Airport. He made his decision. He went home. "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs …"

Brisco and Kipling meet again.

His knowledge and vision of and for the sport helped usher in a new era that wrestling fans are following and enjoying today. Few have had the influence or have left such an indelible mark on the sport of wrestling, or any other sport for that matter, as Jack.

But in and through it all, I don't know if Jack understood, or believed the impact he had on the sport he loved so much. When we released Jack's book at the nationals in St. Louis, he told me he was concerned how he would be received there. He hadn't been to the nationals since he won it in 1965. He had no reason to be concerned. The only line longer at the Savin Center, amidst dozens of world and Olympic champions, was Dan Gable's, who made his way to Jack's table and said, "I've always wanted to meet you," and then spent 20 minutes recalling Jack's matches he had watched as a young wrestler in Iowa. Jack was his hero, too.

We all miss Jack, and I truly believe that, as time passes, we will learn to deal with it better. We will smile and laugh a lot when we think and talk of Jack, but at other times, we will miss him all the more.

The rest of those who have gone before do not steady the unrest of those of us left to follow.

Husband, brother, father, grandfather, friend, champion — Jack made us all better people by just knowing him. He set the standard, not only as a champion, but for the type of people we should aspire to be. Beyond that, and even more important; great champions in this world are rare, good men even more so. Jack was both.

He'll always be the champion to me.

Afterword by Adam Copeland, aka Edge

As a young boy growing up in the frozen tundra known as Canada, I wasn't privy to the information we all take for granted at our fingertips now. You couldn't just hop on a computer and find out information, whether it be right or wrong information, about people you'd heard about. Or seen pictures of. Or just plain fascinated by.

When I was that young boy in Orangeville, Ontario, I was absolutely enthralled with professional wrestling. What the rabbit ears on my black and white TV could access were many promotions in and around Canada. Toronto was a wrestling hotbed. International Wrestling out of Montreal, where I watched one of my future trainers, Sweet Daddy Siki, strutted his way into my heart. British Columbia's All Star Wrestling out of Vancouver with the wily manager Jonathan

"Fuzzy" Sayers and the evil Diamond Timothy Flowers. Stampede Wrestling from Calgary with the emerging careers of Bret Hart, Davey Boy Smith, Dynamite Kid, and many others.

Occasional excerpts from Don Kent's Oregon promotion and a young wild eyed Scotsman from Winnipeg named "Rowdy" Roddy Piper breaking beer bottles over his head, while his partner Rick Martel looke on as they readied for battle with the Sheepherders. The WWF on WUTV from Buffalo with the Bob Backlunds of the world. Pro Wrestling Plus, with host Ed Whalen, which aired on TSN. This was the show where I caught glimpses of the men I would see only in the pages of the Pro Wrestling Illustrated family of magazines.

I would see 30-second clips from Continental Wrestling, Mid-South Wrestling, World Class, St. Louis, Houston, Memphis, Florida, and Georgia Championship Wrestling, where I first witnessed the man I'd read so much about in the pages of The

Wrestler … Jack Brisco.

At that point in his career, Jack was teaming with his brother, Gerry, and embarking on a spectacular feud with a young Ricky Steamboat, who would soon set the world on fire, and his partner, Jay Youngblood. I first saw the Briscos as the conniving, dastardly team who ruined the night of this young tag team I quickly fell in love with. All I had read about Jack Brisco were glowing terms about what a great, noble NWA world heavyweight champion he'd been. To Jack and Gerry's credit, I found it hard to believe. They were just too bad. It wasn't until years had passed, and I saw tapes of Jacks' work as champion, that I finally fully grasped what a tremendous job they had done to get me to despise them as a team. Because, as a solo competitor, Jack was truly the man. He was the man, in a time when the wrestling industry was truly full of men's men … mavericks … shooters and hookers … tough, grizzled, and respected road warriors who traveled from territory to territory.

In order to be the NWA world heavyweight champion in that era was the ultimate tribute. His competition was a who's who; the Funks, Flair, Rhodes, Race. It was like winning an Oscar when your competition was DeNiro, Pacino, Newman, Hoffman and Redford. And, for those moments in time, being better than all of them.

Being just that much classier. Just that much more legit and tougher. You see, from the pages of those early wrestling magazines and the images that I only saw, when they came to life for me, I was astounded. Here was this unassuming man walking to the ring with grace and class. Truly conducting himself as a champion. Work hard. Work long. Work everyone. And make them all look as golden as he was. A truly different character than he was during the days teaming with Gerry as the dastardly Brisco brothers.

That's the testament of Jack's ability. No matter what he did, I bought it. If I'd seen him compete with such poise as world champion first, it would

have angered me as a fan even more when I saw him being so damn good at being evil.

I didn't know Jack discovered Hulk Hogan. I didn't know Jack sold his controlling interest with Gerry in Georgia Championship Wrestling to Vince McMahon, helping to start the worldwide phenomenon that WWE is today by giving it its first national platform on TV on WTBS. All I knew is what I read and, eventually, what I saw.

Years later, as I moved from unknowing fan to become the most reviled character in the wrestling business, I came to know "Jack Brisco the man." In order to understand just how special Jack was, and how important his legacy continues to be to wrestling, I needed one last piece of the puzzle: NCAA championships.

NWA world championships. Enduring matches with Harley Race and the Funks — Dory, in particular, let alone all his other dance partners over the years that he just made better by being in

there with them. To me, that most important aspect, was getting to know and be able to call that man my friend.

While living in Tampa, I was invited to a lunch by Brian Blair, a good friend who I came to meet through mutual friends. He asked me if I wanted to join him, Steve Keirn, Mike Graham, Paul Jones, and Jack Brisco for lunch one day. The people who showed up that day were the who's who in the annals of history in Florida wrestling. Well, yeah! Where do I sign up? I was excited and ready to soak in some knowledge.

Immediately, I liked Jack. He showed me respect. We sat at the same end of the table and just talked. It was such a pleasure to pick the brain of this man who had instilled such strong feelings in me over the years. He still had that humble class.

As the lunch got rowdier, so did the veterans, who began to test this young guy who had been

invited to their lunch. I held my tongue, but for anyone who knows me, that wouldn't last too long. I realized that to gain their respect, I'd have to give as good as they felt they could give.

After a comment by Mr. Jones I simply said, "Hey, Jack. How many former world champions are sitting at this table?"

The silence was deafening … until Jack busted a gut laughing and patted me on the back, saying, "You and me, kid. Just you and me. Good for you."

He laughed long and hard on that one. And that's where we truly connected. He was still a classy, warm man. Gerry told me how proud he was of me that day. I was just proud to be sitting there, talking with Jack Brisco. There are certain moments in one's life that become so surreal, and even more-so with the passing of time.

Years later, as I sat between Pat Patterson and

Jim Ross at Jack's funeral, my mind wandered back to that lunch. I remembered the twinkle in those eyes and the dimples on his face as he fully accepted me into the fold. It was a moment in my life that I'll never forget. The day I became friends, and truly peers, with Jack Brisco.

I've had some great awards and accolades heaped upon my big cranium over the years from the wrestling industry, but earning the respect of men like Jack Brisco through hard work is, without a doubt, the best and most enduring.

Thanks Jack. Don't tie anyone up too badly up there, huh?

THE END

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